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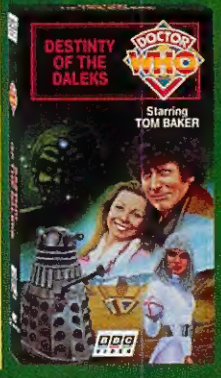

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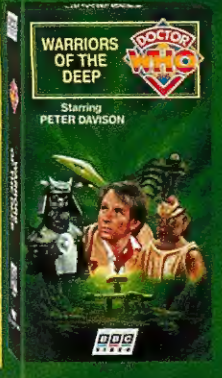

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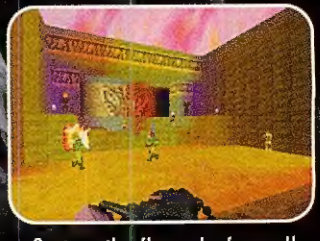

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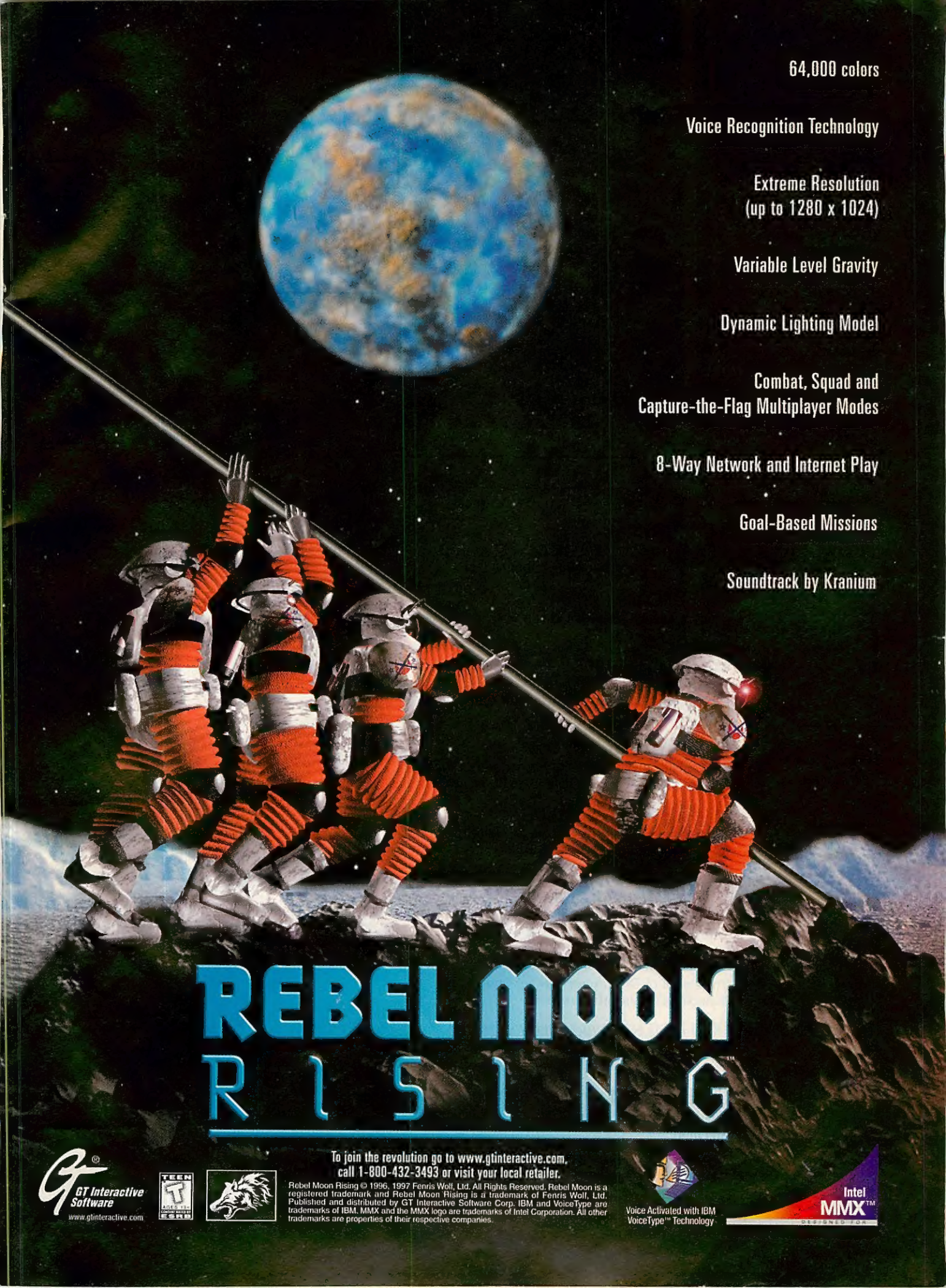
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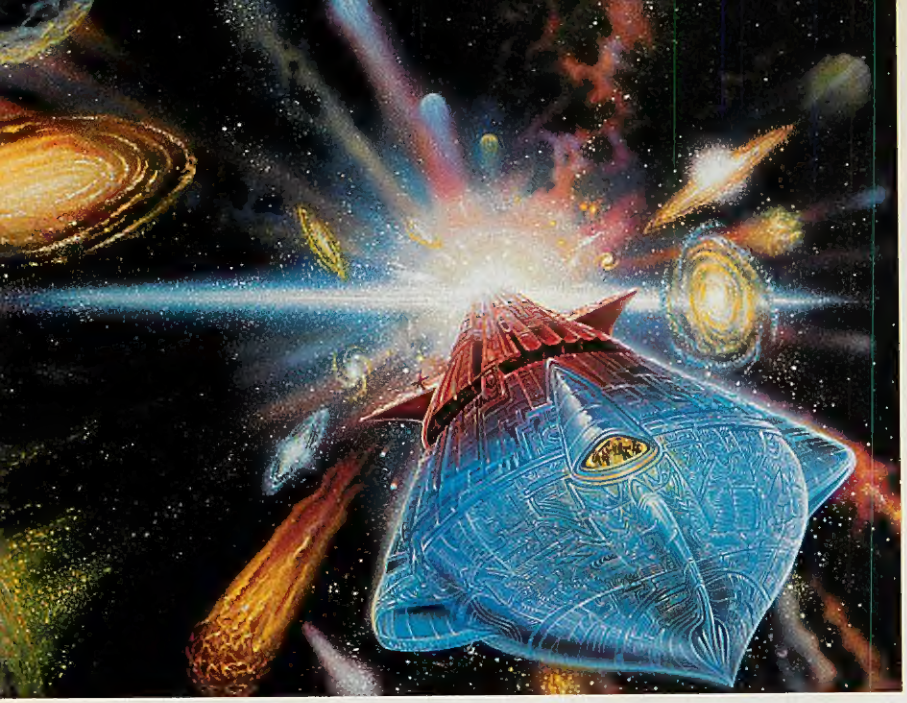

SCIENCE FICTION AGE

COVER: *On the surface of a distant planet, a lone explorer begins to chart a brave new world. Art by Chris Moore.* ABOVE: *The art of Ron Walotsky is almost a textbook definition of sense of wonder, as you can see by the Gallery on page 86.*

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Without Science Fiction there would be no thumbs up.

IF YOU WERE LUCKY ENOUGH TO SOMEhow get your hands on an extant copy of *Who's Who in SF Fandom: 1961* (just where did the years go?), you'd find quite a few familiar names there who later moved on to bigger and better things. Former Wyoming high school student Edward Winslow Bryant is now an award-winning author, for example, as is then Oklahoma University student Greg Benford.

But the most surprising entry for me was that of a University of Illinois English major who listed himself in that ancient resource guide as the owner of over 1,000 old SF magazines and 400 fanzines. His name was (and still is) Roger Ebert, and you know him as the *Chicago Sun-Times* film critic and the only member of his profession ever to have won the Pulitzer Prize.

I interviewed Ebert about his SF roots (and his feelings about sci-fi films) for our companion magazine *Sci-Fi Entertainment*, and was interested to learn that it was SF that started him toward his professional career.

"I was going to SF films in grade school," he told me in an on-line interview, "having become a science fiction reader in earnest in the 1950s after some college students on my paper route gave me big cardboard boxes of *Astoundings*, etc., going back to the 1940s. The early *Astoundings* I saw fascinated me because they seemed to contain knowledge entirely outside my experience. As I read them (Eric Frank Russell, Heinlein, van Vogt, etc.) I was spellbound. Shopping around at the newsstand, I found the other mags, and at that age found *F&SF* too 'literary,' but loved Willy Ley's columns in *Galaxy*, and devoured the lower-end mags like *Amazing* and *Fantastic*. I also joined the SF Book Club and read the omnibus *Astounding* anthology by Campbell, the SF novels of H. G Wells, the Groff Conklin book, etc. By then I was hooked."

Ebert has long seemed sympathetic to the science fiction cause, offering the most intelligent critiques out of the mainstream press when it comes to assessing our genre's charms. Those early magazines — and the fandom he found there — were the cause.

"The columns reviewing fanzines inspired me to mail off for them (by now I would have been, I think, in high school). Fandom to me was a world much like the Internet is today: You were judged on your writing, not your appearance or (this was crucial) your age. As "Rog Ebert," my LOCs [letters of comment] and contributions appeared right next to those of legendary BNFs [Big Name Fans] like Buck and Juanita Coulson, Harry Warner, Harlan Ellison, Ed Gorman, Wilson Tucker and Richard Lupoff. I kept fandom semi-secret from my family, because they did not approve, partially because they feared it would 'distract from my school work.' Did it ever. But I learned so *much* in fandom.

"And one thing I learned to do was read critically. Fanzines didn't simply praise new novels and stories; they dissected them. At a time when many young teenagers were passive consumers of pop culture, I was an active consumer — a critic — and the voice I began to develop then continued on, unbroken, through two college papers and on to my lifelong career.

"I published a fanzine *Stymie*, secretly. Used money from my newspaper job (*Champaign-Urbana News-Gazette*). Cut the stencils myself. Paid a local office supply shop to mimeograph it. Was afraid my parents would disapprove — but more importantly, perhaps, I wanted to make it my own space, not just 'Roger's hobby.'

"Today, hanging out in a CompuServe forum or surfing the Web, I feel an uncanny similarity to fandom in the 1956-64 period when I was active. Same kinds of abbreviations. Same reputations without faces. Same democratic mixture of pros and newbies. Same (it must be said) predominance of males over females. Same weight given to science and technology, instead of only the liberal arts. Same libertarian undercurrents. Same sense of somebody alone in a room in the middle of the night, communicating."

Since he is one of the worlds leading critics and an SF fan as well, I thought it might profit us to find out his thoughts on the war between those who see SF as literature, and others who accept it only as escapist fare.

"The only reason this debate ever got started is that so many people had the sneaking suspicious that SF was not literature, or could not be judged by the same standards. Of *course* it should be judged by the same standards — and if it is, some of it will pass and most of it will fail. Since this is true of all fiction, it should not be a cause for special alarm."

It is good to know that in a day when so many are blaming SF for things like UFO cults and the mass suicide of Heaven's Gate, we can at least take credit for forming a critic as erudite as Roger Ebert, who was given a gentle nudge in the right direction by SF.

Scott Edelman

SCIENCE FICTION AGE

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LETTERS

Dear Mr. Edelman and Co.:

Over the last year, I have cut down on the number of magazines I subscribe to (from 3 or 4 to 1), feeling that they were piling up on me and taking too much time that I should be dedicating to other pursuits ("book-reading" and what-not), but I could not let go of your fine publication, which over the last few years has maintained a consistently high standard of entertaining and thought-provoking fiction and related genre reportage.

The March '97 issue presented a typically enjoyable potpourri, but I particularly enjoyed Phyllis Gotlieb's novelette (Novella? I didn't count the words.) "End City," which combined elements of "cyberpunk" fiction and more traditional hard SF in a fashion which lent freshness to even the more familiar concepts utilized therein. The telepathy angle was interestingly explored, and the story benefited from two things crucial to any good yarn: vivid characters and excellent pacing (with the shifts in time and perspective, it was rather like a mind's-eye roller coaster ride, at points).

Since this issue did not contain the customary (though not comprehensive) mini-bios of contributors, I was wondering if you could provide any information regarding other published works by Ms. Gotlieb, or work that might be pending. At very least, tell her to keep those submissions coming, as this one was decidedly a keeper!

Keep up the great work, and I'll keep happily resubscribing.

Peter Blackwell

Ms. Gotlieb's previous appearance was "Among You" in our November 1993 issue. We, too, wish that her appearances could be more frequent. All of you who are suffering from Gotlieb withdrawal should track down her recent short story collection Blue Apes, *published by Tesseract Press.*

Dear Editors:

I very much enjoyed Charles Sheffield's story "What Would You Like to Know?" featured in the March 97 issue; I admit I take a perverse pleasure when the protagonist is a member of my own profession. (I get particularly gleeful when I remember how prominently librarians are featured in the *Foundation.)* But, alas, being the person in charge of a library does not necessarily make one a librarian. So I was upset when I read one jarring event this particular protagonist did.

In this story, obviously set in the present or near future and almost certainly in the United States, the "librarian" tells one patron the names of the two other people who have checked out the two copies of the videotape he wants.

A professional librarian would have not done this; the student would have been told that the tapes were already in use and that he should ask for copies at other library branches or video rental stories. Under no circumstances should the student have been sent forth to chase the other patrons!

The American Library Association Code of Ethics (revision of June 1995) contains the following item:

We protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted.

Imagine the grief that would ensue if someone were told that his/her spouse was investigating material about divorce or spousal abuse. Feel the humiliation when a pre-teen student is revealed to classmates to be reading *Bedwetting: Beating It Through Self-Hypnosis* (a scene borrowed from Berke Breathed's *Bloom County*; at least in Breathed's rendering, it is a radio DJ and not a librarian who reveals the information). Or consider the implications of FBI or CIA agents asking librarians to report patrons "with foreign-sounding names" who read about chemistry or nuclear physics. Don't laugh; the last example actually happened within the last decade.

The ALA's position is clear: no matter what the situation, every library patron has the right to keep his/her research confidential. Public library borrower information, in most communities, can be revealed only when an overriding public safety issue is involved, such as when a library becomes part of a criminal investigation.

Individual communities and other institutions (such as corporations, foundations, museums, private schools) establish their own policies regarding confidentiality; but, in the absence of any specific institutional regulation to the contrary, librarians are expected to respect and protect patron privacy.

So remember, authors, whether for a bit of background material or a crucial plot point: librarians are not simply the managers of information, we also stand firmly in support of the individual's right to privacy.

Jessica Steinhice

Readers — please let us know how we're doing at: Letters to the Editor, Science Fiction Age, *441 Carlisle Dr., Herndon, VA 20170. For e-mail, use S.Edelman1@Genie.Com. or our CompuServe address of 102746,2004.*

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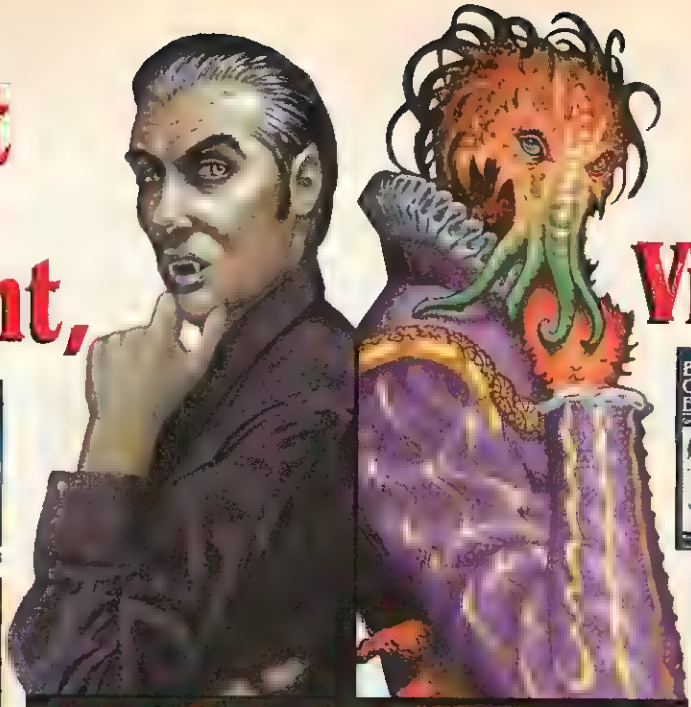

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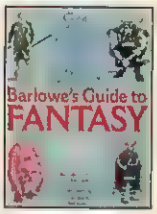

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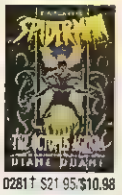

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By Paul di Filippo, Elizabeth Hand and Rachel Russell

Larry Niven asks us all to join him for a thrilling walk down *Destiny's Road*.

ABOVE: *Larry Niven lays out a brand new world before his hero, and before his eager readers as well. Art by Michael Whelan.*

TOPOLOGICALLY SPEAKING, A HUMAN AND A donut are identical. Both human and snack can be viewed as toruses, cylindrical solids pierced by a hole. (In donuts, the hole is obvious; with us, it's our digestive track, from mouth to nether terminus. Most famously, this notion provided the title of Rudy Rucker's novel, *Spacetime Donuts* [1981]). Thanks to a certain method of thinking that finds underlying likenesses among objects superficially alien to each other, scientists and mathematicians have a habit of delivering these startling reductionistic pronouncements. But us literary critics can do it too.

I was moved to formulate a similar SF-related equation recently, while reading Larry Niven's new singleton novel, *Destiny's Road* (Tor, hardcover, $24.95, 352 pages). With your permission, I will dub my discovery Di Filippo's Hidden Homology. It goes like this: A novel that deals with a struggling or devolved human colony on another planet can be mapped directly onto a typical Earthbound post-apocalypse tale.

Consider the major likenesses. In both scenarios, humanity has dropped from some previous peak of civilization. The colonists have relativistically left behind — or perhaps lost touch with — the resources of the mother planet, while the survivors of global disaster see broken ruins of an unattainable Golden Age all around them. Both relatively primitive groups are now less insulated from the natural world, and must face threats and challenges that once would have seemed trivial. Perhaps in both cases there are gradients of technological prowess, pockets of barbarism vying with selfish enclaves of knowledge and gadgets. On the alien world, true, strange lifeforms must be dealt with; but radiation-spawned mutants or leftover bioengineered creatures frequently litter a blasted Earth. Finally, landscape and geography re-assume a predominance in human affairs that they have always had until very recently.

The source of my discovery, Larry Niven's new book, is a tale of an isolated, fragilely stable human colony — on a world named Destiny, lightyears from Earth — that has truly gone to seed (a metaphor that has literal meaning, as we shall see). And yet, while reading it, the resonances that came to my mind were solely with SF's famous post-holocaust novels: Edgar Pangborn's *Davy* (1964), Leigh Brackett's *The Long Tomorrow* (1955), John Wyndham's *Re-Birth* (1955), and Vernor Vinge's *The Peace War* (1984). The book is suffused with a melancholy for options lost and for wrong paths taken. Mysteries shrouded by the past blight present lives. Yet while these sentiments propel our protagonist and his culture, they do not preclude him or others from taking brave and bold actions, from trying to forge their own limited yet precious destinies. As always, Niven's characters are doers, not paralyzed Hamlets, and his depiction of life persisting under harsh conditions (think *The Integral Trees* [1984]) remains unaltered.

Three hundred years before our story opens, a single slowship from Earth, the *Argos*, arrived at a world in the Apollo starsystem. The mothership sent down two sizable orbit-to-ground landers, the *Cavorite* and *Columbiad* , containing supplies and hundreds of colonists, who began to assess their new home.

With typically unrelenting scientific realism, Niven presents his adventurers with an alien ecology featuring lifeforms almost completely unassimilable by human metabolisms. Moreover, thanks to a fluke of biology, one trace element essential to human health — potassium — is almost entirely missing from the native lifecycle, dooming humanity to a slow mental extinction.

Faced with this situation, the Argos crew still in orbit decide to abandon their planetbound shipmates and attempt a life in space. Now the colonists are forced to adapt. Using the fusion jets of the two landers as giant torches, they sterilize a handy penninsula and a portion of the adjacent mainland, then seed the virgin cooled soil with Earth species from their freezers. Later, they fuse

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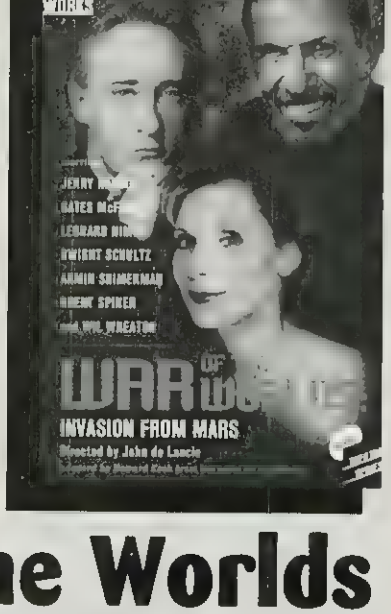

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the road of our title from penninsula tip to uttermost mainland enclave. At each end the road, they settle one lander as a repo tory of tools and knowledge. All is arrang for the best possible maintenance of a hum presence on inhospitable Destiny.

Three centuries pass, and a strange unf balance has arisen.

The Crab penninsula society is backwa and failing, agrarians and fisherfolks. Th very existence depends on the continu appearance of caravans from the mainlan These trading expeditions bear the irrepla able "speckles," a seed-like seasoning tha the only source of vital dietary potassiu These mainlanders are plainly well-off a possessed of more settler tech than their i lated cousins.

One of the residents of backwards Spi Town, the village that has grown up arou the planted lander Columbiad , is our he Jemmy Bloocher. Even at an early ag Jemmy exhibits a kind of Huck Finn restle ness and inquisitiveness that insures he w not become your average staid citizen of S ral Town. When, as a young man, he accide tally kills a merchant and must flee, resolves to find all the answers to the en mas of his world. Now Niven's plot is truly motion.

Through one semi-reclusive Crab penni sula society after another, all compelling detailed, a travelling Jemmy makes his wa In each he tries to adapt to local custom even to the point of getting married, hoping find a new home. But his ambition and curio ity always get the better of him, and itchy fe propel him ever onward to the final barrier prohibition by the autocratic merchan against any "Crab shy" ever reaching th mainland. However, Jemmy circumven even this — only to end up on a prison far Here Jemmy learns the secret of speckles, knowledge that will eventually allow him liberate his homeland — but only after a lo and curious period of self-induced lotus-ea ing, detailed in the relatively short Part Thre

Readers familiar with Niven's usual co mological speculative boldness might ve well read each page of this book with th expectation that some grand revelati awaits around the next bend of the Roa Surely Destiny is an artificial construct! Pe haps super aliens will arrive and rescue ever one! Maybe a native plant will *confer* amazin powers on Jemmy! Well, disabuse yourself these notions immediately. Niven is scrup lously fair to his opening conditions. This is be a straightforward tale of one young man journey through life, a picaresque adventu with a certain small grail hovering in the di tance, sometimes burning bright, sometime almost extinguished. I think the most tellin detail about Jemmy — about this novel — fact that reveals the limits and strengths both novel and character, is Jemmy's voc tional goals.

On the road, while contracted to a carava (hiding ingeniously among his very pu

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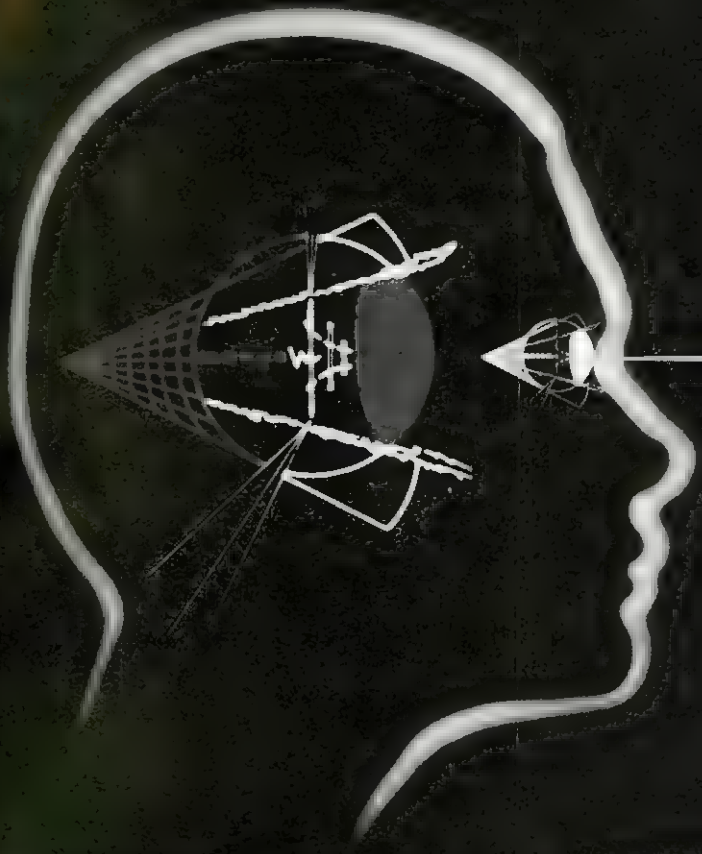

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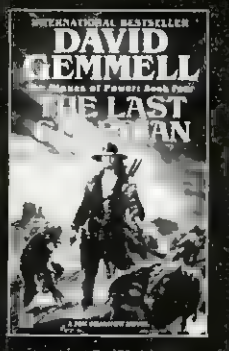

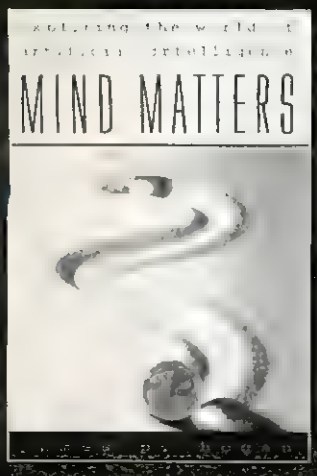

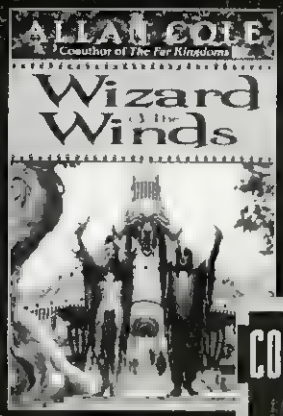

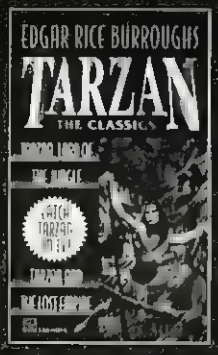

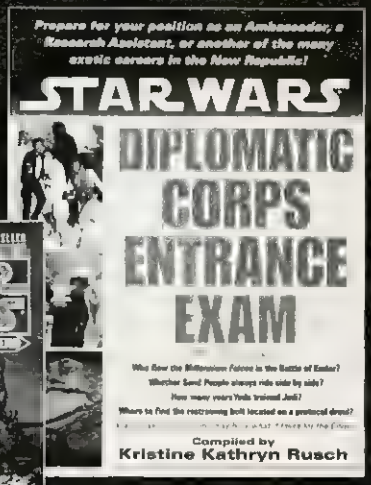

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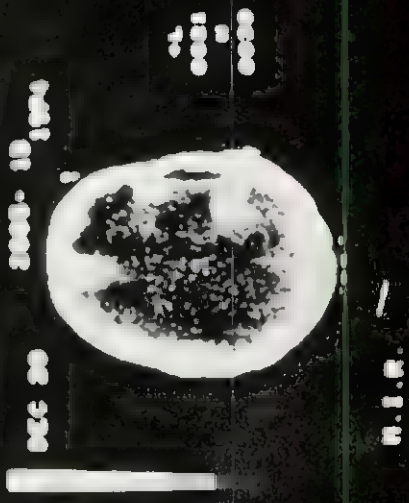

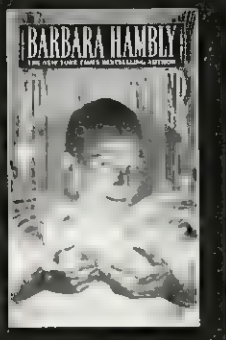

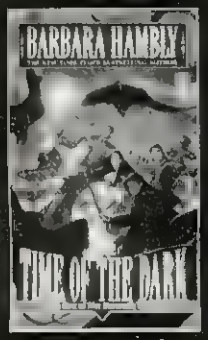

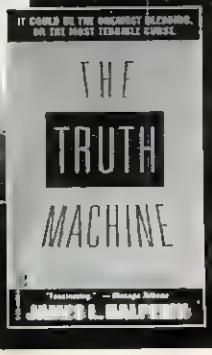

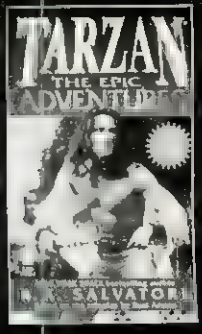

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suers!), Jemmy learns to be a chef. After his escape from the prison farm, still on the forbidden mainland, Jemmy goes to ground as cook at a inn not far from his stated mecca, Destiny Town, Spiral Town's antipodes. He buries his head in the sand for an inordinately long time, until tragedy reawakens him to his almost-forgotten mission.

This slumber and revival complete a universal pattern evident throughout the book, the Monomyth explicated in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Niven is giving us a Campbellian tale all right, but it's not John's. This time, in a story of individual maturation, we learn not so much about man in the cosmos, as we do about the cosmos in a man.

Paul Di Filippo

The Family Tree *by Sheri S. Tepper. Avon Books, hardcover, 384 pages, $23.00.*

My more than eight years of work on a biological science journal doesn't allow me the luxury of assuming all is well with the earth. As exciting as some developments are in biology — human genome research, neuroscience — article after article in dry, ordinary, clear language spelled out the environmental mess we're living in. I think when all is said and done and historians are analyzing the twentieth century — if the future has historians — they will simply not understand how we could allow such destruction. How, they will wonder, did people live an ordinary life in the midst of this death? There is little in our art, little in our daily discourse, to indicate any concern at all, though the facts are well known. That future historian will be greatly relieved to discover *The Family Tree* by Sheri S. Tepper.

Tepper is known for her concern with ecological issues, as well as others, in such highly recommended works as *The Gate to Woman's Country* (1988) and *Grass, Raising the Stones, Sideshow,* and *Beauty,* among many others. She is a compelling storyteller. Being able to weave in serious concerns and even actual morals, without interrupting the flow of story, is a rare gift and one Tepper clearly has.

The Family Tree continues this pattern, with wonderful characters, a compelling mystery, and superb worldbuilding. Tepper has also tapped into the power of myth, giving her prose a haunting quality, and the truth a chance to be heard. It is not just colored by our current environmental problems, those problems end up being the very core of the novel.

The novel intertwines two worlds that at first seem little connected. Dora Henry is living in our world. She's the oldest of eight children and she's had a tough life. Though her grandmother gave her love and eventually a home, her parents were only good at making children. Dora did most of the childraising. This led her to become a cop, because she was good at stopping arguments and prying facts out of people. Eventually, all her brothers and sisters, for better or worse, were launched into the world, and her parents and grandparents were both dead. That was when Dora moved to a boardinghouse, where she met Jared and for reasons she doesn't understand herself she agreed to marry him.

Jared is a cold, unhappy man, rigid and set in his ways, doted on by his Momma. But that's okay, Dora's got her job, she likes having things organized after what she's been through, she doesn't think about things much, she just cooks Jared the food he wants and keeps the house clean. Until one day, a Weed appears in Jared's front lawn. And Dora gets assigned to the investigation of a murdered scientist. He's not the first scientist to be stabbed in recent months. It's no surprise when the cases turn out to be related. But as the investigation continues, and as Dora leaves Jared — as if a spell was broken — all around the city more strange Weeds and trees and vines are growing. Nature is seemingly fighting back against its destruction, and Dora's days have a dreamlike — or perhaps nightmare — quality to them.

Dora's chapters alternate with chapters set in a magical, mythical, world, one that at first glance seems full of innocence and joy. For one thing, the names are so silly. There are tribes of different people such as the ponjic, armakfatidi, scuini, pheledas, kannic and kaperiel, onchiki and Onchik-Dau. Nassif (called Opalears), a ponjic slave girl in the court of Sultan Tummyfat, is assigned to accompany one of the Sultan's sons, Sahir, who is being sent on a journey to St. Weel. The journey is ostensibly for healing, but really it is fulfill a prophecy. And as happens on journeys of this sort, their little band of travelers is joined by others, including ponjic Prince Izzy, who Nassif ends up liking a lot. Izzy has been teased and tormented his whole life by his prophecy — that he must solve the Great Enigma or all posterity will die — and he decides it is time to just get cracking and solve it.

Nassif is a storyteller and she tells some of the story of this journey and its adventures in her own voice. But some chapters in this world are also third person, such as Countess Elianne and her encounter with the Dire Duke, twin to the Prime Duke, who are nephews of the Emperor. Each chapter is interesting and ultimately everything ties together. As it does the fantasy world, step by step, becomes more complex, the people ever more interesting. There is real trouble brewing in this world, trouble that our little band of people must stop.

And ultimately the two worlds — our world of Dora, murders, and Weeds and the fantasy world of Quests and magic — intersect when Nassif and the others end up in Dora's backyard. The people all turn out to have a common enemy. And he must be stopped or no one in either world will survive. The surprising plot twists and revelations had me so hooked I couldn't turn the pages fast enough. The worldbuilding is just great. The fantasy world comes alive and becomes more "real." The real world becomes strange and different. Each step along the way is exciting and fascinating.

The joy can't hide the facts that our world, like the real world in the beginning of *The Family Tree*, is facing serious environmental trouble, all the more tragic for being our fault. Our world will not find magical solutions, but I highly recommend this novel.

Rachel Russell

Jovah's Angel *by Sharon Shinn, Ace Books, $13.95, 389 pp*

I came to Sharon Shinn's new novel, *Jovah's Angel*, with high expectations. Shinn's first book, the much-praised *The Shapechanger's Wife*, received several awards and had been recommended to me by a number of people. Her second, *Archangel*, was also well-received, and while the subject matter — a planet inhabited by angels — did not exactly strike sparks within the heart of a much- and long-lapsed Catholic, I was willing to suspend my unbelief. Alas, I must confess that while Shinn's novel has its charms, and is certainly the work of a talented writer, it failed to make a believer of me.

Set in the same world as *Archangel*, *Jovah's Angel* tells the story of Alleulia (known as Alleya), a musicologicaly inclined angel who through no fault of her own finds herself appointed Archangel, a position with even fewer perks than that of Attorney General of the United States. Some hundreds of years

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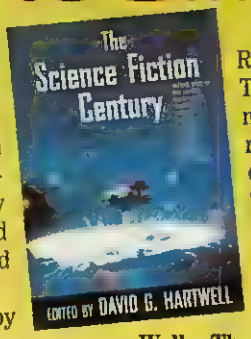
earlier, the world of Samaria was colonized by 1200 human settlers from the planet Eleison. Their descendants now populate a countryside where the boroughs have names like Bethel, Gaza, Jordana, Mounts Egypt and Sinai, Seraph,the Corinni Mountains. The people themselves have solidly Biblical-sounding monikers — Caleb, Rebekah, Micah, Noah, Job — and fall into several castes, including the mercantile Manadavvi, the nomadic Edori, the Jansai and the angeli.

These last are, of course, angels, descended from fifty mortals who centuries before had been surgically altered by Samaria's scientist elite. Their function: to control the planet's weather, which runs to extremes — ceaseless snow or rain to the north and south, barren near-desert elsewhere. As years pass, the job position changes; their vocal ability takes precendence over any real talent for climatology, so that when we join the tale in Alleya's time, the angels appear to be relegated to the role of singing intercessors for the rest of Samaria, raising their voices when crops fail, tornadoes strike, floodwaters rise. Whom they intercess to, is Jovah; and one need not be a rocket scientist to figure out that Jovah is God, and that he resides in a spaceship somewhere above Samaria's tempestuous plains.

As a matter of fact, one doesn't need to be a rocket scientist to figure out much of anything in *Jovah's Angel*; and therein lies much of its weakness. Shinn's prose style is pleasing, if simple. No literary pyrotechnics here, which can actually be quite pleasant for readers scraped raw upon the cutting edges of a David Foster Wallace. But Shinn's creation is utterly, almost mind-boggingly, literal, and surprisingly run-of-the-mill. Those meteorologically inclined seraphim have wings — with feathers! (One longs to see Willard Scott done up like this.) The nomadic Edori could have wandered in from the backlot of *The Ten Commandments*, the conniving Manadavvi from one of those *Star Trek* episodes where everyone goes on shore leave, visits some ersatz interplanetary *souk*, and learns a darn good lesson in the process. And when, towards the end of the novel, Alleya is beamed up to visit Jovah in the flesh (er, microchip) for the *de rigueur* tour of the star-

Continued on page 93

Books To Watch For



The Science Fiction Century, edited by David G. Hartwell (Tor). SF is a century old, and Hartwell has the stories to prove it, all the way from our Wells and Kipling beginnings to newborn classics by the likes of Ellison, Tiptree and Gibson. A highly recommended SFnal education.

The Art of Arrow-Cutting, by Stephen Dedman (Tor). You've read his many dazzling short stories in this magazine and *Realms of Fantasy*. Now it's time to see what he can do with the novel. Don't miss his brilliant and startling book debut.

The Reality Dysfunction, Part One: Emergence, by Peter F. Hamilton (Warner Aspect). The international cosmic hit comes to the U.S. with a vast tale so epic that it is being published in two mass market volumes a month apart. Far future adventure by a welcome new talent.

First Contact, edited by Martin H. Greenberg and Larry Segriff (DAW). A baker's dozen tales of alien encounters from the distant past to the far future by Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Dean Wesley Smith, Josepha Sherman, Gordon Eklund, Jack Haldeman and eight others.

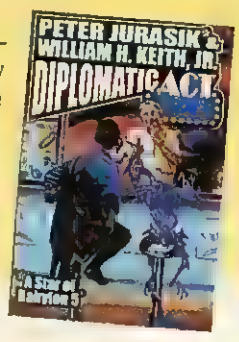
Isaac Asimov: The Foundation of Science Fiction, by James Gunn (Scarecrow). The first edition of this bio of the Good Doctor won Gunn a well-deserved Hugo. This new edition brings us up-to-date through Asimov's final works.

The Door into Summer, by Robert A. Heinlein (del Rey). This publisher is putting out a number of Heinlein classics this month, including *Friday*, *Space Cadet*, and *Tunnel in the Sky*. Those of us who grew up on these know there's not a Heinlein you shouldn't own, so buy all four.

The Angle Between Two Walls: The Fiction of J. G. Ballard, by Roger Luckhurst (St. Martin's Press). This seminal figure of the British New Wave is once more in the news, thanks to the controversial film *Crash*, based on his novel. Luckhurst explains the Ballard phenomena.

The Horns of Elfland, edited by Ellen Kushner, Delia Sherman and Donald G. Keller (Penguin Roc). This top notch, long-awaited anthology devotes itself to the musical fantastic, and features short stories by Gene Wolfe, John Brunner and many others.

Diplomatic Act, by Peter Jurasik and William H. Keith, Jr. (Baen). *Babylon 5*'s Londo turns from actor to writer in this co-authored novel in Baen's Starline imprint. An actor who isn't really an alien diplomat (he just plays one on TV) is mistaken for his role by the *real* aliens.



Young Miles, by Lois McMaster Bujold (Baen). It's a tradition that Bujold's novels about Miles Vorkosigan win Hugo Awards. You might as well read this one before it brings home the trophy it seems destined to receive.

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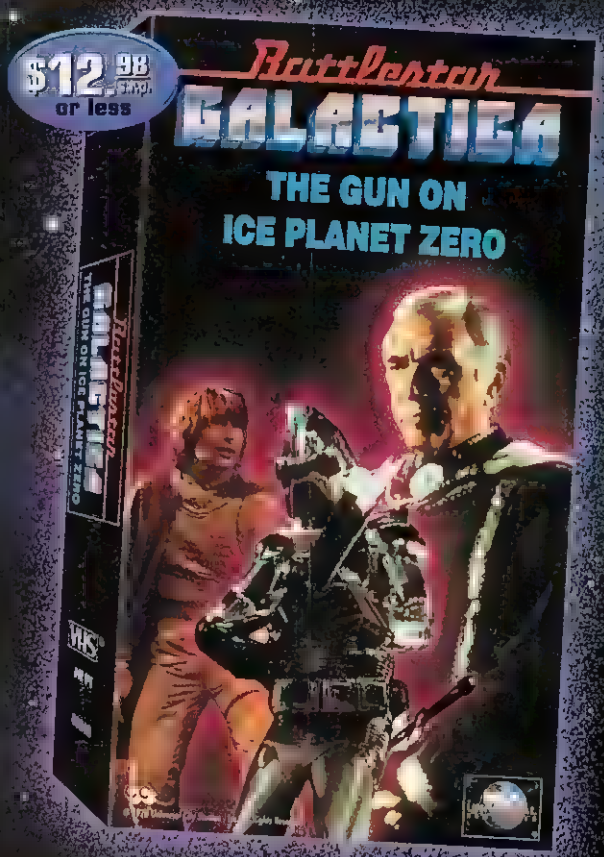

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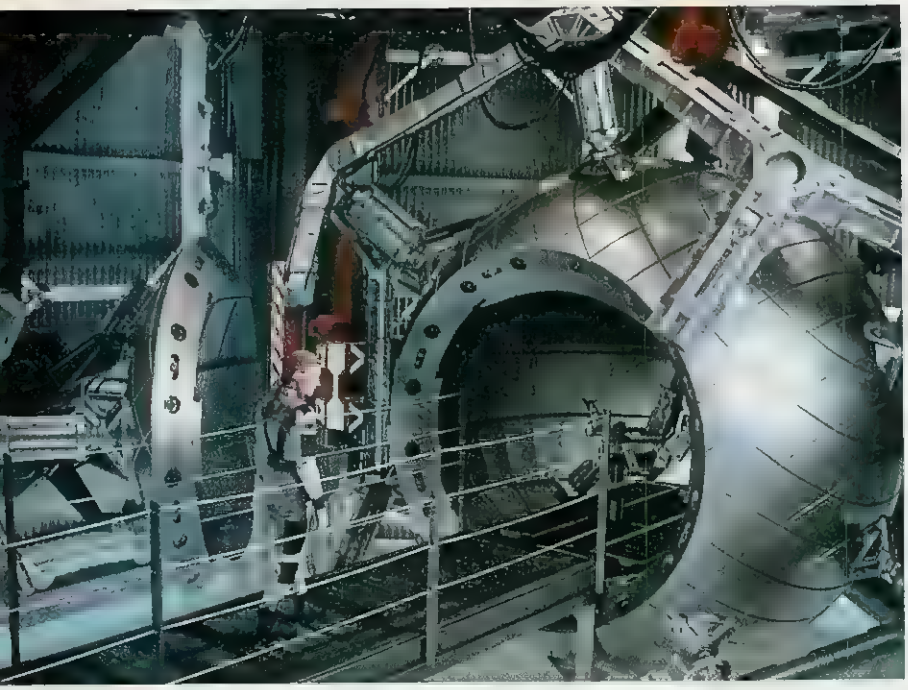
By Dan Perez

She transformed Horror with *Silence of the Lambs*, and now Jodie Foster is about to do the same to SF.



ABOVE: *Jodie Foster helps bring to life Carl Sagan's hopeful vision of alien contact.* BELOW: *A clean-shaven John Hurt portrays the enigmatic billionaire S. R. Hadden.*

IN A CASE OF MOVIEMAKING SERENDIPITY, ROBERT Zemeckis, the Oscar-winning director behind *Forrest Gump* and the *Back to the Future* trilogy, just happens to be releasing *Contact* not long after a Martian meteorite showed signs of extraterrestrial life.

Contact is based on the bestselling novel by the late Carl Sagan, who popularized science and became a celebrity in the process with *Cosmos*, his 1981 PBS miniseries. *Contact* is the story of headstrong, visionary astronomer Ellie Arroway, played by Jodie Foster, who intercepts radio messages from an intelligent civilization on a planet orbiting the distant star Vega. Matthew McConaughey plays Palmer Joss, a religious scholar and government aide who allies with Arroway amid the global tumult of the news regarding the messages. Also featured are John Hurt as influential and enigmatic billionaire S. R. Hadden, James Woods as National Security Advisor Michael Kitz, Tom Skerrit as David Drumlin, Ellie's mentor-turned competitor, and Angela Bassett as Rachel Constantine, a presidential advisor. Locations for the film included the Very Large Array (VLA), a collection of 27 dish-shaped radio telescopes in the desert of Socorro, New Mexico, as well as the world's largest radio telescope at Aricebo, Puerto Rico.

Steve Starkey, the Oscar-winning co-producer (with Zemeckis) of *Forrest Gump*, says of the location shooting: "Were there location challenges? Yeah, everywhere we went. it started with the VLA, the opening week of filming, where I chose to go there first in October, because we're going to the lower desert of New Mexico, where the Fall is supposed to be the most pleasant and temperate time of the year. So we go down there and sure enough, it was the rainiest fall in central New Mexican recent history. And not only was it rainy, but there were near gale-force winds.

"Finally after three days of sloshing around at dawn and dusk, because that's when our sequence took place, we finally got out of that and said, 'Thank God, tomorrow's supposed to be crystal clear,' we wake up and find out that there's a ground fog so thick you couldn't even see the radio dishes. Then all it meant was that since you had very limited telescope time, if you will, you had to then create the rest of the schedule that worked in relation to what hadn't already been done. It put a lot of pressure on us because it was the first week, and I was just getting my feet wet with Jodie, trying to make her believe the production had our act together. (Laughs) She's going 'oh, man, these guys are coming out of the gate...' But she knew it wasn't anything we were doing — it was all being imposed upon us. And so she went with it, and it showed me right at the outset that this woman was ready to go down this filmmaking path with us. In a way it was like an early bonding. It wasn't fun, because you were waking up early in the morning and working late at night, but you got the sense that here it is, we've established our unit, we have a big long movie, and we're all going to fight our way through it."

Foster was involved from some of the earliest stages of the project, as was director George Miller (who helmed the project before Zemeckis took over) and Christopher Goldenberg, the screenwriter.

"Well," says Goldenberg, "I came on in July of '93, and did a couple of drafts. I actually left at that point to do another project, that I was directing. So I left and came back on two years later, in July of '95." The rewrites on

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ABOVE: Jodie Foster plays astronomer Ellie Arroway, who intercepts radio messages from an alien civilization. BELOW: *Tom Skerrit as Foster's competitor for first contact.*

the script had gone off in an undesired direction, Goldenberg notes, "and so they brought me back to get it back to its original direction."

Sagan was also involved, prior to his death in December of 1996. "He was always in the loop," Goldenberg says, "and invaluable as a technical advisor — nothing slipped past his radar. He'd say 'they wouldn't say that this way,' or 'this would be done that way,' so getting that credibility and authenticity was a big key to the movie. And Carl brings that in spades. He was tremendously helpful."

Goldenberg says that as he wrote the adaptation, some condensation of both characters and situations, had to occur: "Oh yeah — that's inevitable. It's such a different form. The beauty of the book is that Carl has all the time in the world to go into all these digressions and explain various phenomenae, and it's fascinating. Of course, a two and a half hour movie doesn't have the luxury of doing that. And Carl understood that better than anybody."

One character distilled from a number of others was David Drumlin, played by Tom Skerrit. "He was originally the mentor in the original script that I read," says Skerrit. "I didn't read the book. Drumlin is really the composite of several people in the book, apparently—in economizing the book and transforming it from book to screenplay. In the original draft of the screenplay I read he was somewhat of a mentor that she was both in awe and fear of, who, when she went to Cal Tech for a PhD, was her guide there, her mentor.

"That changed in subsequent drafts; less of that was the issue. He wasn't so much of a mentor and a father figure as he was. He became more of a scientist/politician — conservative scientist who felt that the purpose of science really should be on a much more practical level; that it should serve the society paying for it and not spend tax money on frivolous theoretical pursuits, which of course is contrary to what science means.

"That was really more of an ambitious point of view or belief on his part, and very politically oriented. It's obviously prudent to talk about economics, being economically frugal in this day and age with government cutbacks and all: that's basically what his design was. When it becomes apparent that Jodie's character is pursuing what he feels is a more frivolous expenditure in trying to listen for sound coming in from outer space so she can pick up suggestions of intelligent life.

"When she does find that there is intelligent life out there, and it has evolved this blueprint for a space transporter, he then turns around and says 'I want to be the guy to go,' so he uses his political savvy and position to manipulate himself into the position where he's the one to go. So he undermines her throughout, and basically patronizes her — he's somewhat of a chauvinist that says 'there, there little girl— keep your place.'"

Another of Ellie's potential opponents is National Security Advisor Michael Kitz, played by James Woods. "Actually, Bob had seen Nixon," Woods says of landing the role, "and he liked what I did with Haldeman, and wanted me to play a character that was, quite frankly, somewhat similar to that. I'd always wanted to work with Bob, we'd had opportunities where we were going to work together, but I wasn't available twice and another time I didn't get to the part in time, so we've always missed each other. Then this came up, and I took it sight unseen — I mean I read it, of course, but I would really have pretty much taken it sight unseen — he's such a remarkable director. When reading it, I was so much more impressed by the kind of internal journey that this story's about. I mean it uses all the special effects, but in very subtle ways. It's much more in the mind and the soul. I think people are going to like this movie. It's a very smart film."

With Sagan's background as a scientist and rationalist, did Goldenberg feel obligated to keep *Contact* as plausible as possible? "I felt a real responsibility because I've been a science fiction fan since I was a kid," he says. "And I've seen the good ones and the bad ones, and had a real awareness that I wanted to write a movie that I wanted to see, as a science fiction fan. One that really took its subject seriously, which really paid attention to detail and got it right and wasn't sloppy around the edges the way they sometimes are.

"And with a movie like this, because you've got a Carl Sagan novel, you've got that authenticity and that credibility. In fact, you've got a movie where everything has to be totally real — you're making this one sort of leap of imagination with this message coming in, but what makes that work is that everything around it is real, and Bob's mandate at the beginning was 'this is going to be the movie of what would actually happen'.

We're always asking ourselves what would really happen in the media, politically, personally, so that was always the touchstone."

"You do want to live up to the level of what Carl was trying to say in the book," says Starkey, "and that's always a pressure, because you read it, respond to it, and then say 'gosh I hope I can make the movie live in the same way that I'm feeling about this subject. But I don't know that that's any different than embarking on any movie."

"We all understand, as well as Carl, that there's a certain place where plausibility stops and speculative science begins. Let's put it this way: the movie has a real base. If a real signal came in — and by the way, it could — what form would it take, what in fact would really happen if you were in a facility like the VLA or at Aricebo, how would the world respond, what would the political reaction, what would the religious reaction be, the scientific community's reaction, etc. With all of that, we were trying to be as real as possible.

"Then there's a certain point when the story says it did happen, which it hasn't, but in our story it does. Then at that point, you have to take a leap, and then you do use the best guidance you have from someone like Carl Sagan, but at the same time, you're making a movie, so you have to use the genius of Bob Zemeckis. He's able to bring you through that reality and once you've hung on to your seat and said 'I'm ready to go on a ride with you,' then he takes you somewhere. But you've already come out of a basis of having a foothold in something you believe is really happening. So that's the way that it sort of evolved."

Forrest Gump's *Robert Zemeckis (in blue shirt) on the set of* Contact, *with Jodie Foster.*

The concerns raised in *Contact* were one of the things that attracted Woods to the project: "I was really intrigued by what happens here on Earth if someone says tomorrow that we've been contacted by lifeforms from outer space. What happens to the religious community, to the scientific community, to the defense community — a lot of questions would start being asked. I was just intrigued by what Bob was going to do with that by answering that question with an intelligent exploration into the answer.

"I was so much more impressed by the kind of internal journey that this story's about. I mean it uses all the special effects, but in very subtle ways. It's much more in the mind and the soul. I think people are going to like this movie. It's a very smart film." □

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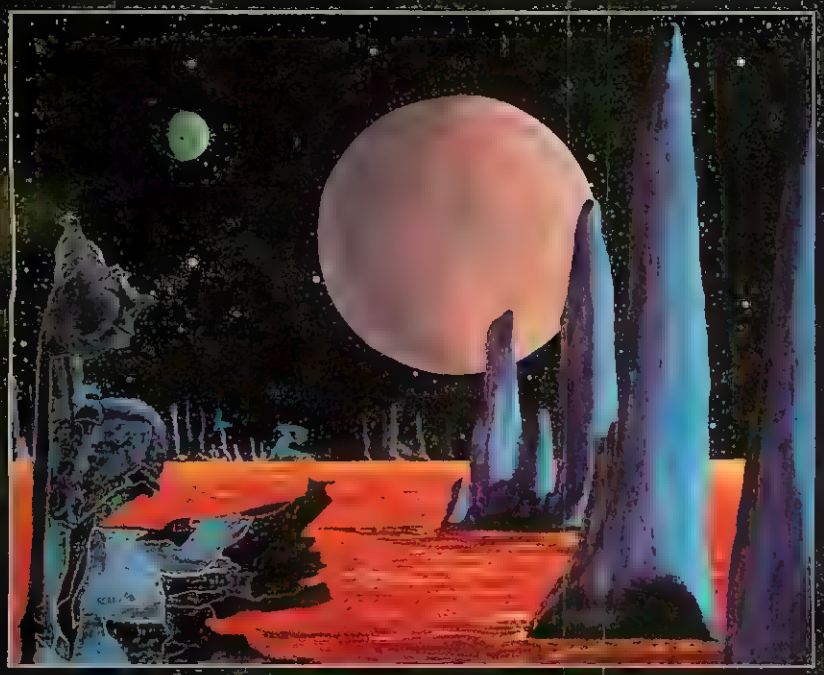

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the U-FILES

Dana Scully and Fox Muldur have nothing on writer Doug Moench. For while they are only TV characters attempting to solve the clearly fictional *X-Files*, Moench is a real life self-proclaimed conspiracy theorist who has used his skills learned while writing such comic books as *Batman* to assemble a volume on mysterious phenomena that Cancer Man wouldn't want those bemused Fox FBI agents to read. In *The Big Book of the Unexplained* (192 pages, $14.95), famed artists such as Paul Gulacy, Gahan Wilson, Russ Heath, Rick Geary and others illustrate Moench's many mini-scripts that attempt to shed light on the mysteries of the ages. This newest Factoid Book from Paradox Press joins *The Big Book of Conspiracies* as a must have for any self-respecting investigator of paranormal paranoia. Moench provides the lowdown on alien abductions, the strange saga of James Dean's automobile, and weird creatures as yet unknown to science. These tales of the unfathomable are suggested for mature readers only. Readers wishing further information can seek out DC Comics Online at keyword: DC Comics on America Online.

COMICS

GAMES

BORG game

The Borg are trying to assimilate everything these days, including the best *Star Trek* game in the galaxy. Decipher, makers of the *Star Trek Collectible Card Game*, have just announced that thanks to last year's hit film *Star Trek: First Contact* they have been assimilated by the Borg, which will result in major innovations in game play as well as in the card packaging itself.

The Borg collective is the first new affiliation added since the original Federation, Romulan and Klingon forces introduced in the premiere edition, and brings with it potent new elements: time travel, Zefram Cochrane, the Enterprise-E and the Phoenix. The expansion set of the baddest villains in the galaxy is made up of 90 cards, with 40 rares, 25 uncommons and 25 commons. Each nine card expansion pack contains 1 rare, 3 uncommons, and 5 commons, and has a low pack price of $2.50, down from $3.00. Compared to the old 15 card packs, Decipher figures that fans will save an estimated 17% in their search for a complete *First Contact* set. For further information, seek out the brave new worlds of Decipher at www.decipher.com.

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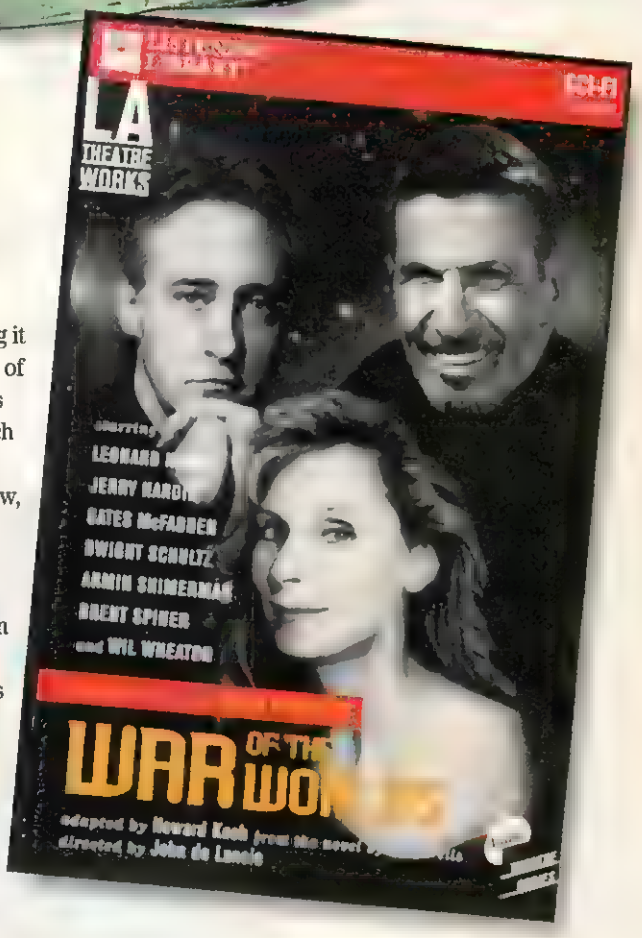

H. G. Wells gave birth to it, Orson Welles terrified a nation with it, and now our favorite *Star Trek* actors are bringing it once more to life for a new era. We're talking, of course, of *War of the Worlds*, that tale of Martian invasion that has fascinated us for almost a hundred years. Howard Koch dramatized the 1898 Wells novel into a 1938 radio play that had listeners convinced the invasion was real. Now, in this L. A. Theatre Works production, regulars from all four *Trek* series join forces to dramatize the radio play that caused a nationwide panic. Leonard Nimoy, Jerry Hardin, Gates McFadden, Dwight Schultz, Armin Shimerman, Brent Spiner and Wil Wheaton brilliantly reinterpret this classic drama. As an added bonus, this 70 minute audio cassette contains an exclusive interview with Gates McFadden. Call 1-800-243-4504 for a free catalog containing information on this and other audio delights from Listening Library, such as Ray Bradbury reading the complete *Martian Chronicles* or Jane Yolen performing the unabridged *Wizard's Hall*. Visit their website at www.listinglib.com/listlib.

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SCULPTURE

Many of us who grew up dreaming of Mars grew up dreaming of Frank Frazetta. For a generation of readers, his lush oil-painted covers and his finely etched pen and ink interior illustrations represented Edgar Rice Burroughs' *John Carter of Mars* series in a way that no other artist ever could. nd now, in the same year that scientists have told us that Martian life did in fact once exist (though not like that for which we've dreamed), sculptor Clayburn Moore has made those early dreams come true. Moore is the winner of multiple art awards, including the prestigious Chesley in both 1992 and 1994, and was the perfect choice to bring Frazetta's lush vision of Martian life to the third dimension. This bronze statue, titled "Princess," comes in a limited numbered edition of 75, and is mounted on a base of hardwood and Italian marble. A few remaining copies are still available for $3,000 plus $75 shipping and handling. See for yourself why Frazetta himself said "I don't know of anyone who could have captured my work more beautifully." For further information, call toll-free at 1-888-485-8134.

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Mars Attacks!: Tim Burton's mad mind made a dark comic stew of the controversial trading cards that showed Earth falling before the invincible armies of the Red Planet. The cast, a Who's Who of modern film making, featured Jack Nicholson, Glenn Close, Rod Steiger, Tom Jones, Pierce Brosnan, Annette Benning, Michael J. Fox and many other top notch stars that made this sci-fi's answer to *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World.*

Star Trek: The Greatest Battles: Each of the four *Treks* steps forward here to deliver their wildest warfare episodes. *ST: The Original Series* presents "Balance of Terror," *ST:TNG* provides "Gambit" Parts I and II, *ST:Deep Space Nine* offers "The Way of the Warrior," and *ST: Voyager* gives us "Maneuvers." The six cassette set comes with a transparency of battling starships plus a special display frame.

Seconds: This 1966 Rock Hudson classic is considered one of the best SF films ever as well as one of the greatest horror movies. Hudson portrays an older man who gets involved with a secret society and undergoes extensive cosmetic surgery so he can begin his life anew. His freedom, he soon discovers, comes at a terrible price. This is the first uncut version of this film released to video domestically due to a controversial nude scene.

The Hunchback of Notre Dame: Just as the latest Disney blockbuster *Hercules* prepares for release, the Mouse House's previous hit is released for home viewing. Though filmed many times, this was the first animated version of the classic Victor Hugo tale. Demi Moore and Jason Alexander provide the voices for this classic story of a deformed orphan living in a belltower who befriends the gypsy Esmerelda.

Thinner: Stephen King's classic tale of revenge, originally published as one of his pseudonymous Richard Bachman novels, gives horror an intriguing new twist. A gypsy curse forces a prominent attorney to wither away in this Tom Holland-directed horror flick. Starring Robert John Burke and Joe Mantegna, and available on both video cassettes and laserdisc. Perfect viewing while you wait for the upcoming new version of *The Shining.*

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By Geoffrey A. Landis and Robert J. Sawyer

Don't feel sheepish if you haven't come to terms with cloning.

ABOVE: *Cloning could cause more problems than it solves, as we are forced to watch ourselves grow. Art by Don Maitz.*
BELOW: *Dolly, the sheep of the century, posing with her surrogate mother.*

THE WORLD HAS BEEN ROCKED BY MANY recent scientific discoveries, but none has had as huge a reverberation as the the shock announcement of the cloning of a large mammal — Dolly the sheep, who is the first of her kind in this brave new world of ours. What will this mean for the future of humankind? We thought it would be wise to find out.

Geoffrey A. Landis' fiction credits include the Hugo Award winner "A Walk in the Sun" and the Nebula Award winner "Ripples in the Dirac Sea." He works for the Ohio Aerospace Institute at the NASA Lewis Research Center. Robert J. Sawyer's *The Terminal Experiment* (HarperPrism) won the Nebula Award for Best Novel of 1995; it was also a Hugo Award finalist. His *Starplex* (Ace) is a current Nebula finalist, and his latest novel *Frameshift* (Tor) is an SF thriller about the Human Genome Project.

SF AGE: The world was recently shaken by the revelation that a large mammal has been cloned — a sheep named Dolly — setting off all sorts of shockwaves. For how long has this been coming?

LANDIS: Science fiction has seen it coming for a long time, Scott. The rest of the world was a bit surprised.

SAWYER: Geoff's exactly right. The three big discoveries of the last two years — planets around other stars, possible extraterrestrial life, and now cloning — are *all* things that SF readers would have been surprised if they *hadn't* happened soon.

LANDIS: As always, in real science the path was a lot harder and took more people and more time than SF would have us think.

SAWYER: I don't think anyone predicted a sheep's teat would be the key to cloning. And the results, in many ways, are less dramatic than what the SF reader wanted. We wanted to see two identical lifeforms, side by side. Dolly is a singleton — we can read the DNA charts, and see that she's genetically the same as her mother, but it's not the kind of "Geoff, meet Geoff" approach that would have really knocked people's socks off.

LANDIS: Actually, two identical life forms is something I've seen several times before — we call natural clones "identical twins." I am much more fascinated by the cloning of a juvenile from an adult.

SAWYER: We've actually had cloning for a number of years; it's long been possible to take a cell early in development, and produce an exact duplicate.

LANDIS: But this is the first time a clone has been made from an adult.

SAWYER: What we've done here is take a mature cell and in essence reset the cellular timers so that it behaves like an early, undifferentiated cell. Dolly was made from a cell that had already decided it was a teat — as opposed to part of a brain, or a heart, or a liver, or skin. We thought that once cells had differentiated they couldn't go back to being an undifferentiated cell, like the kinds found early in embryonic development.

LANDIS: Which is a piece of work with fascinating consequences all by itself.

SAWYER: Although the cloning aspects are interesting, what may be more interesting is that we've found a way to make cells behave as if they are young again. We may be on to the key to immortality, which is probably much more interesting than just mass production of genetically identical beings.

SF AGE: Were you surprised by the world reaction?

SAWYER: I was somewhat surprised. It was more reasonable than I'd thought it might be — lots of calls for more study, few cries for outright bans.

LANDIS: Actually, I was amazed at the reaction — or, I should say, at the overreaction. There were far too *many* calls for banning research.

SAWYER: Oh, at the individual level, sure. But your government

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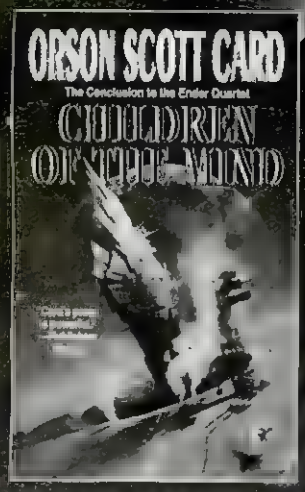

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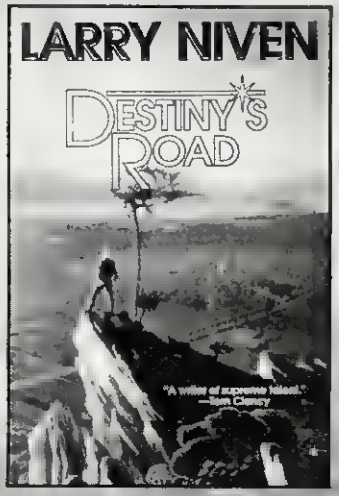

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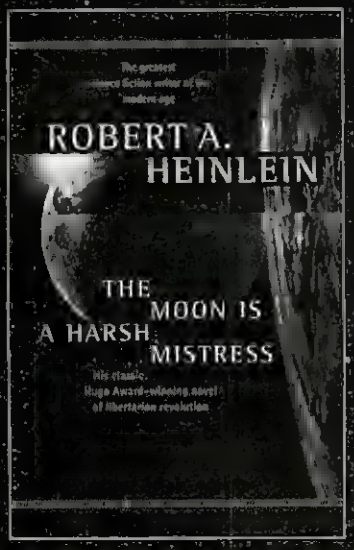

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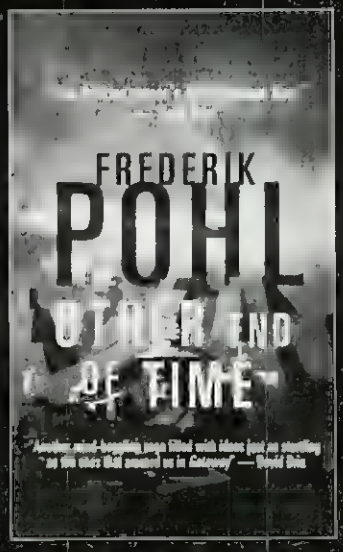

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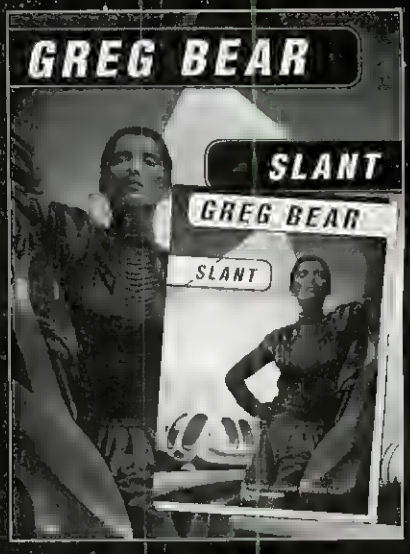

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(U.S.) and mine (Canada) are setting up committees to rationally study the issue — and that's a good thing.

LANDIS: The implications of cloning human tissue could have *wonderful* consequences — and instead everybody is saying, "But what if they cloned a human?! That would be awful!" What would be so awful about it? Why is everybody so upset?

SAWYER: Some people are saying that, yes, Geoff. But, hey, there will always be reactionaries. As to why it's an issue – it's not, with in utero fetus development, but cloning with in vitro fetus development — which may well be the next step — is going to force us to revisit every aspect of the abortion issue. I don't favor a research ban; the benefits come from the next level of investigations. Although I think we already have a pretty good idea of what causes the death switch — degradation of the telomeres — and the cloning technology doesn't ameliorate that. Telomeres are the end caps on chromosomes — sort of like the plastic bits on the ends of shoelaces. Recent research in senescence suggests they get lopped a bit shorter each time a chromosome divides, and after sufficient divisions, nothing is left and the chromosome can't divide anymore; thus a maximum number of divisions, and therefore a maximum lifespan is preprogrammed into our cells; if telomeres could be reinstated, biological immortality might become possible. As Dolly's creator says, it'll be very interesting to see how Dolly grows, given that her DNA thinks it's much older than the body in which it now resides.

LANDIS: Right. Degradation of the telomeres is precisely the question. And reversing this was the big breakthrough in cloning Dolly the lamb.

SAWYER: Are you sure that the Roslin team reinstated the telomeres on Dolly's DNA? My understanding is that they didn't do that. *Science News*, March 1, 1997, page 132, quotes Grahame Bulfield, director of the Roslin Institute (where Dolly was cloned) as saying, "Our 7-month-old lamb actually has a 6-year, 7-month-old nucleus in all her cells. It's going to be interesting to see what happens to the aging of this animal." Rather than resetting the telomeres, my understanding is that the biochemical change in the adult teat cell was brought about by starving it of nutrients for a week, causing it to go dormant, and, when food was finally made available again, that one sample cell (but none of the others they tried the same thing with) reset itself in an undifferentiated state — kind of a cellular cold boot.

In Jurassic Park, *Steven Spielberg posited that cloning could bring extinct animals back to life. Science isn't there yet, but it hopes to someday catch up with science fiction.*

LANDIS: The lamb was cloned from an *adult* sheep, from cells that were already differentiated. This is the awe-inspiring work, cloning from an adult. They managed to "turn back the clock" and take cells that had differentiated into specific tasks, and make them go back to cells that could become anything.

SF AGE: So where do we go from here?

SAWYER: Leukemia treatments, cancer treatments, and other health benefits, hopefully. The biggest pluses aren't in creating duplicates of entire organisms — at least at the human level — but rather in medical applications.

SF AGE: But you know that the medical applications are not what the general public thinks about.

SAWYER: Not at first blush, no, Scott.

LANDIS: No, the public seems to think about cloned armies. Rich men cloning thousands of themselves. Clones for organ donors. Cloning Einsteins and Hitlers.

SAWYER: But I've been very pleased at how quickly the public debate has moved up to a higher level. Geoff hangs out with a more luddite crowd than I do [grin]. But, of course, at some point we may well see a rich man (or woman) cloning himself or herself. The question is, is there anything wrong with that? And the scarier question is, if you've got the gene for Huntington's disease, and you've already produced one child who doesn't have that disease, should your insurance company be able to pressure you to clone the successful child, instead of taking the 50-50 crap shoot of trying another randomly generated offspring?

LANDIS: I'm not sure if that would be an issue.

SAWYER: Oh, it certainly will be, Geoff. I've spent the better part of a year researching insurance-industry coercion of those with genetic disorders.

LANDIS: By the time we can clone humans fully we will be able to select sperm and ova for the Huntington trait. Thus, no problem. Select sperm and ova without the trait, and do an in-vitro fertilization.

Multiplicity *showed the trouble possible if clones help us look at ourselves face to face.*

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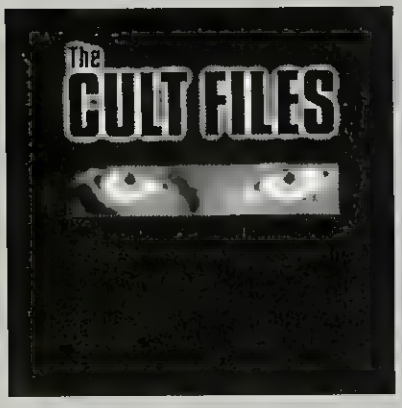

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SAWYER: Yes, with Huntington's, you can (recently) do that, because we've recently identified the gene. But there are disorders for which we don't yet know the gene. Sure, if you want to say eventually we'll know everything there is to know about how life works, thanks to the Human Genome Project and other endeavors, and so no problems will exist, fine. But I'm much more interested in the transitional period between when we have partial knowledge and partial tools. That's when the laws will be made

LANDIS: But most of the "ethical dilemmas" are actually rather artificial, like the one Rob just cited. It has a solution far simpler than using cloning.

SAWYER: Only because I suggested Huntington's; possibly a bad example. Is this artificial? It *will* be easier to clone a whole organism, rather than to selectively grow a heart in vitro. We will be in a position where you can grow a whole donor before we can grow just the parts we need. Yes, all ethical quandaries may eventually disappear, but I think on the one hand you're looking too close to the present day — oh, that's way off, you said, a while ago. Or you're looking past the difficult period to a rosy future.

LANDIS: When you need a new heart, you need it *now*, not twenty years from now when your child grows up.

SAWYER: Geoff, say your doctor tells you at 20 that you have a gene that will give you a series of heart attacks starting at 40; you most certainly could benefit by starting to grow a new heart donor today.

LANDIS: Sure, Rob. Or you could just have five children, and cut one of *them* up for parts. It's the same issue; your children will probably have the same tissue type you do. The issue is cutting people up for spare parts — it's not cloning.

SAWYER: The five children will each have one-half of your DNA; rejection will still be an issue. Also, there may be a mind-set that says your DNA is *yours* to do with what you please; you *can* make a clone without your spouse's consent; you can't make a regular child that way.

LANDIS: Uh, lots of people make children without their spouses' consent; sometimes without their knowledge. Sometimes without a spouse.

SAWYER: By spouse, I meant another genetic contributor to the process. Really. Geoff, let's not play word games, or dance around the issue.

LANDIS: Haven't you ever heard of artificial insemination? You don't need *anybody's* consent.

SAWYER: But you're still glossing over potential rejection issues — which only go up when you add someone else's DNA.

LANDIS: The point is that people think of all the worst possible things that can happen, and say that cloning is the issue.

SF AGE: That's what I mean — the straw man arguments will drive research and bans — not the real issues.

SAWYER: No, Geoff, people think of all the things that can happen, period. Some are good, some are bad. All are worth looking at; none should be dismissed by saying that's not the issue, or that we won't dignify that with a response — *that's* how research gets banned: the patronizing don't-worry-your-pretty-head attitude doesn't go down well with the electorate. I think we're both in favor of cloning.

LANDIS: Yep, me first!

SAWYER: And we're both in favor of research not being banned. But science needs to address PR issues. That's the reality.

SF AGE: Are the scientists capable of doing their own PR, Rob?

SAWYER: No. In fact, I think we science fiction authors have an important role to play: *we're the* ones who tell stories that people can relate to about issues that otherwise might be too dry, or too arcane, or simply not considered.

SF AGE: Have we done a good job so far?

LANDIS: So so.

SF AGE: How did you use the themes?

SF AGE: Speaking of fictional uses of cloning, what did you think of *Jurassic Park* true?

SAWYER: I actually thought it was pro-cloning — the problems are bad fences, not bad dinosaurs. The big problem with the *Jurassic Park* scenario is DNA degradation. We *might* be able to clone a Neanderthal — I posit a cave in which aerobic bacteria used up all the oxygen, so that the pyrimidines didn't oxidize — but getting 65 million plus year old DNA to be viable is much harder than getting 40,000 year old DNA to be viable.

LANDIS: Yes, making *Jurassic Park* real will take a lot more than just learning how to clone. But the Japanese are working on cloning a mammoth from frozen cell samples.

SAWYER: On the other hand, I can't think of anything more interesting to clone than dinosaurs — unless it's the putative Martian life from meteorite samples.

LANDIS: True. It would really require the ability to actually read DNA sequences, and put broken sequences together like a jigsaw puzzle.

SAWYER: One wonders if *Jurassic Park* hadn't been made if the public would have been so interested in this cloning story? *Jurassic Park*, with its little cartoon sequence about DNA and cloning, really educated the world on what was previously a pretty arcane topic. Would Dolly have been front page news without that?

SF AGE: So where will we be in 25 years? If we came back to talk about this, would we discover a changed world? What effect will this all have down the road?

LANDIS: There will be two of each of us.

SAWYER: I think 25 years is just about the right horizon. The Human Genome Project — which will give us all sorts of powers related to genetic engineering — will be done by then. Twenty-five years from now cloning will be an accepted tool. It's getting through the intervening twenty-five years that'll be the challenge — scientifically and ethically.

LANDIS: Well, I'm sure that in 25 years the problem of cloning a human will be solved, and people could do it if they wanted. I'm also sure that none of the horror scenarios posited will happen. Some rich people will have clone children.

SAWYER: I'm not as sure as Geoff is about that. Humanity is famous for going right up to the brink, before it steps back and gets reasonable. We'll still have nuclear power 25 years from now, but we may not have nuclear weapons.

LANDIS: And you say *I'm* optimistic?!?

SAWYER: Likewise, I think we *will* have to face a few cloning horror scenarios before we make up our minds about what we, as a species, will countenance.

LANDIS: No, the cloning horror scenarios are all myths. The world has a lot of evil in it, sure, but the evil is in us, not in the technology. Actually, it's 100 and 200 and 1000 years down the road that will be interesting.

SAWYER: And I fully intend to clone myself enough times to see how that all turns out.

LANDIS: Ah, but the sad part is that even when you do that, *you* won't ever find out.

SAWYER: At some point we will know how to download whatever it is that makes us who we are — whether it's into machines, or into cloned bodies.

LANDIS: Now, *that* might be a future worth waiting for. □

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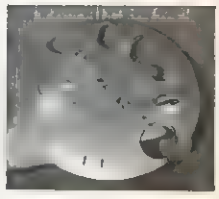

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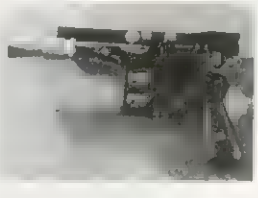

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Mikel was either the first of a new breed or the last of a very old one. Whichever was the case, his world would never be the same.

GROUNDLING DANCER

MIKEL AWAKENED WINGLESS. HE SHIVERED, STANDING NAKED IN THE EARLY MORNING CHILL OF THE BEDROOM IN THEIR CLIFFAPT, FEELING NUMB AND DISTANT, STARING DOWN INCREDULOUSLY at the pair of dried, withered, brown husks on the bed. Tentatively, he reached out and touched them, brushing the wrinkled, dead things with the tips of his fingers, the texture like old, dry parchment; and he remembered long ago, when he was a boy and finding the shed skin of a dragonette up on the canyon rim — it too had been wrinkled, dry, paperlike, dead.

Still feeling as if he were partially tranquilized, he called out hoarsely, "Aylin, please come see this."

His wife entered their bedroom, the bright Medtech Guild caduceus tat on her right cheek contrasting sharply with her pale features, her storm-gray eyes almost matching the color of her folded wings.

"Yes, Mikel," Aylin answered, the questioning frown turning to momentary surprise, as she stared where he pointed at his wing remnants. She recovered her poise, quickly taking charge of the situation and ordering in a calm, measured voice, "Sit back down and take a few deep breaths. I'll be right back."

She disappeared for a moment, returning from the bathroom with her medkit in hand. Withdrawing a small laser scalpel, she said, "I'm going to trim away some dead skin. It won't hurt..."

Then, with gentle hands, she carefully inspected his back, coming to rest on the wing nubs. "Sore or tender at all?" she asked.

Mikel shook his head.

"Turn around," Aylin said, kneeling and running her hands over his bare thighs and down his legs. Finally, she stood and shrugged slightly, still maintaining her professional voice. "It's like the computer summary suggested might happen," she explained, "only much sooner than we expected." She worked in the village medcenter and had taken Mikel in for

BY GENE O'NEILL

Illustration by Ken Graning

a complete workup about a month ago, when they first noticed the strange changes in both his wings and legs.

AFTER THE TESTS, THE DIAGNOSTIC COMPUTER HAD KICKED OUT a very technical printout of all the findings with a short summary: ...NO DNA ANOMALIES, BIOENGINEERING SOUND. VERY UNUSUAL, AN APPARENT UNDESIGNED ATAVISTIC REVERSION. WINGS ATROPHYING. LEGS GROWING FUNCTIONALLY STRONG.

So, this morning after recovering from the shock, Mikel felt an intense compulsion to exercise his legs, perhaps similar to a newly-winged infant's need to stretch his developing wings.

Since he could not fly, he took the communal supply downchute from their cliffapt, cut high into the north face of the canyon wall, down to the village square, the only flat area of any consequence on the entire canyon floor. After reaching the plaza, he began to jog about the raised hummerpad, occasionally leaping over an imaginary hurdle, around and around the square, faster and faster, until he was forced to stop, gasping for breath, his one-piece, nutrend outfit dark with sweat.

Catching his breath, Mikel looked up, over the tops of the side-by-side, two-story, graystone buildings lining the square, just as daymoon peeked over the canyon rim, the appearance of the beautiful satellite at this time of year indicating it was almost eight o'clock.

Loud, raucous laughter across the square disturbed his momentary revery.

Mikel dropped his gaze, scanning the balconies and second-floor entries of the bistros, shops, cafes, and inns overhanging the plaza, most closed at this early hour. A few people were eating at one of the cafes, probably tourists from Seaside, the nearby coastal city, come to glide on the early morning updrafts of the funnel-shaped canyon that opened toward the sea, but they were ignoring him.

Ah, there, directly across the square at the *Flying Squirrel Bistro*, three young strangers were pointing at Mikel and laughing, making fun of his wingless condition. Obviously up all night drinking. Tourists, he thought, shaking his head dismissively and shifting his gaze back again toward daymoon, entirely visible now above the canyon rim, its color and texture reminding him of an opal —

Something flashed by within inches of his head.

Startled, Mikel turned as the flier again swooped back at him, making him duck this time to avoid being struck in the head.

Then, all three strangers were swirling around Mikel like giant, angry bees, attacking, and shouting taunts about his lack of wings, driving him into the stone apron of the hummerpad, his arms protecting his head.

"Defective."

"Scurrying rodent."

"Wingless freak."

"Runner."

"Groundling."

Suddenly, for some reason, the three relented, flying up in the air and circling away out of sight.

Mikel caught his breath, trying to assess the attack and the taunts... *Groundling?*

It was the name of a mythological wingless race that had supposedly lived long before man in the distant past before the Great Flood receded. Often written about in children's stories as spooky beings, groundlings stole pre-winged infants who were never seen again. Occasionally wingless people were dramatized in holoplays, usually tragic-comedies. And, of course, there were the infrequent reports of current sightings — though the sighted creatures were now called runners in the media rather than the old term. In any event, to be called a groundling shocked Mikel because it highlighted his difference from other villagers, suggesting that he was an earlier, more primitive, being, reminding him of the medcenter computer's mention of atavism.

But he had little time to catch his breath and reflect.

They were back, the three swooping down, flying by and showering Mikel with rocks as he remained frozen in place, most bouncing off his arms and shoulders. Suddenly he felt sharp pain, and he wiped at his forehead, the sight of a crimson smear on his fingertips jarring him from his semi-trance.

He dashed for the cover of the lowest balcony, pressing his back against the cool stonework. Frightened and dumbfounded by the vicious attack in broad daylight, he tried to make sense of it. Things like that happened in Seaside and the other large coastal cities to the south. But here in the village? And why me? Then, a really amazing thought struck him as he gained control of himself: No one from the village had intervened.

Mikel wiped away the remaining blood, dusted his clothes, and eased out from the cover of the balcony, realizing his vulnerability now that he lacked wings. Looking up, he ignored the people at the cafe leaning out staring at him, and scanned for signs of possible overhead danger — feeling like a rodent cowered by the possibility of aerial attack and shamed by the feeling.

They were gone.

Mikel sighed thankfully with relief, as he hurried toward the safety of the upchute.

THEY WERE BACK. THE THREE SWOOPING DOWN, FLYING BY AND SHOWERING MIKEL WITH ROCKS AS HE REMAINED FROZEN IN PLACE, MOST BOUNCING OFF HIS ARMS AND SHOULDERS.

AS THE DAYS PASSED, MIKEL BECAME EVEN MORE wary of all people — villagers and tourists — exercising in the plaza only very early, before anyone was up and about. And he soon learned there were other complications related to his wingless condition. His card renewal in the Stonecutter Guild was being held up. He couldn't work at the quarry or any construction job and was effectively unemployed. And their friends had stopped visiting and calling. Aylin was even being hassled at work.

Yet, despite all these problems brought on by his wingless condition, Aylin remained by his side, loyally supporting him.

By necessity, Mikel spent more and more of his time at home, keeping busy by fashioning another room into the canyon wall beyond their bedroom with his cutting torch and drills.

EARLY IN THE MORNING, ABOUT FOUR WEEKS AFTER losing his wings, Mikel was working out vigorously in the plaza, leaping, running, jumping, going through a whole repertoire of movements, assuming he was alone. But when he stopped to rest and leaned against the hummerpad railing, he spotted a man, bearing no facial guild tat — obviously a southerner — sitting alone on the balcony of the village's finest inn, The Stone Aerie; and the stranger seemed to be observing him.

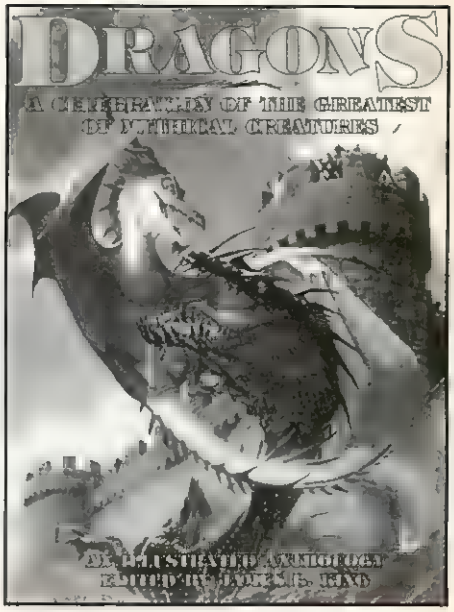
Mikel began to turn and head for the upchute —

"Wait," the stranger shouted, shedding a dark cloak, and spreading a set of purple-veined wings. He quickly glided down and landed near Mikel. "Sir, allow me to introduce myself," the man said, handing Mikel a card that read:

Tuvlo's Aerial Circus
City of Towers
Maestro Tuvlo

Of course Mikel had seen the magnificent aerial acts on the holoviewer, and this man was obviously the current Tuvlo in charge of the Circus.

Enter the world of the dragon, feared, respected, worshipped, loathed.



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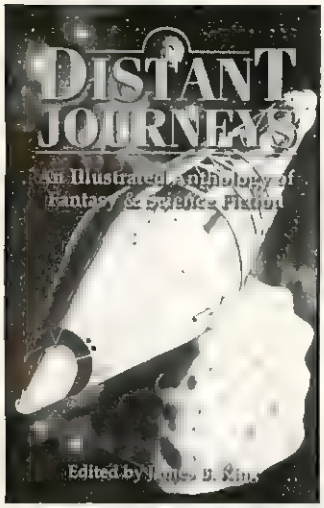

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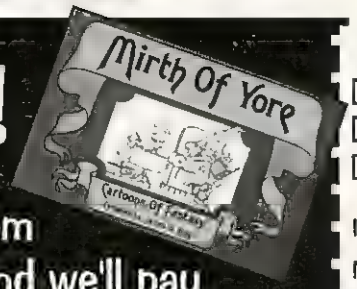

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There was small talk about the man getting away from the City for a three day respite here in the northern coastal mountains, and enjoying the famed updrafts at the upper end of the canyon. Then, the maestro abruptly changed subjects: "Forgive me, but I have watched you moving so remarkably about the square early each morning on your legs — "

Mikel felt his face flush.

"I do not mean to denigrate your lack of wings," Maestro Tuvlo added, holding up a hand apologetically. "Quite the opposite. I congratulate you on the magnificent and really elegant use of your legs. A quite outstanding development. And I am prepared to offer you a contract, if you will consent to coming to the City. We have five weeks of performances left there, then we travel to all the large cities on both continents — "

"You mean as a *freak*?" Mikel interrupted, his embarrassment quickly changing to anger.

The maestro smiled politely, shaking his head emphatically. "No, I do not mean that, my friend. I mean as an unusual performer, a groundling dancer."

MIKEL WAS INDEED ALONE NOW... COMPLETELY IN COMMAND OF HIS BODY AND MOVEMENTS, AN EXTENSION OF THE BEAUTIFUL MUSIC, HIS STRONG LEGS PROPELLING HIM THROUGH THE SHORT ROUTINE

"A performer?"

"Yes."

At first, Mikel was stunned by the offer. He was just a common stonecutter, earning his guild tat when he was only a boy of fourteen, uneducated, untraveled; and he'd never dreamed of being any kind of artist, even when he'd been winged. And a groundling dancer. He'd never heard of such a thing.

"Of course you will need to be coached by a choreographer, but with your existing wide repertoire of graceful movements, combined with the fascinating mystique surrounding the old race, I think I can safely say that you will be a hot attraction at the Circus in only a few days. Still, the contract will only be temporary, for the remainder of the season in the City. Then, who knows what will work out? What do you say? I think I can make a substantial offer...say, a thousand a week."

A thousand a week, for five weeks? Almost a year's salary. Mikel couldn't speak.

"Oh, make it twelve hundred," the maestro said magnanimously, shrugging and smiling, "I don't wish to haggle over a few week's salary."

Mikel still remained silent.

"Maybe, you need to discuss it with a wife, your guild?" the maestro suggested.

Mikel nodded. "Yes, I do." Although he really owed the guild nothing. And he knew Aylin would be thrilled by his good luck. The Aerial Circus? Just imagine.

"I have a good feel for this sort of thing," Maestro Tuvlo added. "I suspect this will be a grand opportunity for both of us."

They shook hands and agreed to meet at the inn later in the day.

Of course Mikel eventually agreed to go.

THE EARLY TRIP ON THE HUMMER SOUTH, ESPECIALLY DROPping down out of the sky and circling over the City of Towers, was exciting. The towers were constructed from rare crystal-stone and sparkled brilliantly in the morning sun.

After landing they went immediately to the performance dome, where Mikel stored his belongings in a small guest room off the second-floor administrative wing and freshened up. Then Mikel and the maestro entered the great aerial arena proper. By then it was late afternoon, the waning sunlight filtering through the translucent dome, down on the rows and rows of seats — thousands and thousands of empty seats. Never had Mikel been in so huge an indoor place.

He stood quietly by the maestro's side, taking it all in, dazzled by the grand dome. Then overhead, the performers began appearing for practice.

The dancers wore feathered, emerald costumes with crimson breasts, and with their transparent wings rapidly fanning the air, they resembled a line of neon flutterbirds, hovering momentarily before the music thundered from the orchestra pit. So elegant, Mikel thought, awed by the grace of the flying dancers. The maestro pointed out the famed clown troupe, practicing their comic tumbling routines. Over there, another group: jugglers, fire eaters, acrobats. And the featured single performers, wearing their holographic animal totems — the Dragon Lady flew sinuously high overhead up near the crest of the dome, her scales and wings glistening iridescently.

The performers seemed bigger than life. It was all so grand and wonderful. Mikel could not believe he was to be even a small part of it.

A beautiful, young woman approached where they were standing, and smiled.

"This is Taj," Maestro Tuvlo announced, introducing Mikel to his choreographer's assistant.

And that same evening, Mikel and Taj set to work on the groundling dance routine.

They worked long hours in the days to come; and even though Taj was demanding, challenging Mikel often, she was patient and rewarded his corrected efforts with encouraging remarks: "Very good," or, "Well done." And she insisted he would do well.

"LADIES, GENTLEMAN, AND CHILDREN," THE MAESTRO SAID IN his deep voice, three days later at the Wednesday matinee, "a special added attraction today at the Circus. May I present Mikel, the wingless man, and his groundling dance."

The lights went out.

After a drum roll, Mikel, in a one-piece, blue spangled, skin-tight costume was spotlighted on a raised platform, his pulse pounding furiously. Taking his first position, he closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath, as Taj had instructed, imagining he was alone, just like in practice. Then, accompanied by the orchestra, he began to dance, moving gracefully through the choreographed sequence of jumps, twirls, bounding leaps, all keyed precisely to the music.

The audience was quiet at first during the introduction; then, at the beginning of the dance, a few sniggers, laughs, and guffaws, soon followed by a rude swell of loud chatter. Finally, near the end of the performance, a sudden and complete silence, as if the spectators had all been struck dumb.

Mikel was indeed alone now, ignoring the audience reaction, completely in command of his body and movements, an extension of the beautiful music, his strong legs propelling him through the short routine, his sequins glittering in the spotlight that followed him about the uplifted stage. He felt completely relaxed now, at home at center stage...The concluding leap and triple spin, and he was resting on his knee.

The crowd, stunned by the unique event, remained silent for several more moments, then began to applaud, politely at first, followed by sporadic shouts of appreciation, and soon a burst of clapping, whistling, and shouting that rocked the dome.

IN A WEEK, MIKEL BECAME THE FEATURED ATTRACTION, THE GREAT performance dome filled to capacity every night. The maestro even added five more matinees to complement the Saturday and Wednesday day performances. The City's media was full of the special attraction; and after every performance Mikel was pestered with questions from journalists about his wingless condition, background, origin, and opinions on a variety of unrelated topics.

MOORE CREATIONS

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BY

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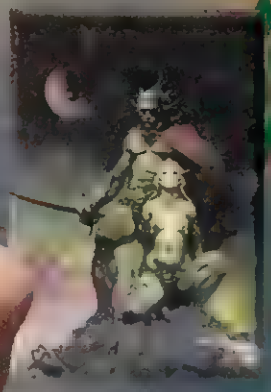

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"I am only a simple stonecutter from the coastal mountains up north," he replied, "so I know little about *that*."

The maestro helped with the media and screened the multitude of requests for personal appearances and such, Mikel able to maintain a relative degree of privacy — no one really aware that he lived and spent most of his free time in the guest room at the performance dome.

He called home after that first busy week.

"Things are really going well, but I miss you," Mikel said to Aylin, "and I love you..." He wanted to explain more, what all this meant to him. Not anything about the money or fame or glamorous people he had met, but the fact that he was really himself, now. *Not* a wingless freak, but a legitimate performer at the Circus. A groundling dancer. And he wanted to share the things he was learning about the old race, from discs Taj brought him from the library. But he lacked the right words to match his feelings.

"I love you, too," Aylin said, her usually calm expression animated with excitement. "And I am so proud of you..."

He could tell there was something more she wanted to add. "What is it?" he asked.

"Well, things have really changed here in the village," she said. "For the better."

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone has seen you on the holoviewer, and I think they understand now what you have accomplished despite your loss," Aylin answered.

Loss? In just a week he had almost forgotten how miserable and isolated and different he'd felt back in the village. And no support from anyone, except for Aylin.

"So no one is bothering you, anymore?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No. Everyone is really good to me. They all ask about you...And I can hardly wait to see you." Then she was off on village life and gossip.

Mikel only half listened. Her good news had only dampened his enthusiasm about how he felt about all that was happening to him in the City. So he mentioned none of it.

After Mikel's twenty-fifth performance, the maestro called him to his office. "We want you to go on tour with the Circus, become a permanent member," he announced. "Before I offer another contract though, I suggest you call your wife, discuss it. Get her approval. We will be gone two months on this tour. A long time. Then, maybe after we get back, you'll be able to bring her here to the City of Towers to live?"

"Of course," Mikel said. "I'm sure Aylin will be thrilled." But would she really? He had not even mentioned the possibility of staying longer than five weeks to her. She was already counting the days until he came home. And what would she think of the City? Would she fit in? It was all so different from their village. No one here even wore guild tats.

The maestro was standing, offering his hand.

On his way out of the office headed for his room, Mikel was so preoccupied, he didn't notice Taj step from the shadows in the hall, until she was directly in his path.

"Hello," she said, smiling apologetically. "I didn't mean to startle you." She had a special glint in her eyes, like a child anxious to spill a secret.

He laughed at her excited expression. "What is it?"

"I have something to show you," Taj said. "It's a new costume design I've made up from my research. A set of clothes resembling what a groundling may have *actually* worn in the past before The Great Flood. I want you to try them on."

"Really?" he said, intrigued.

Mikel followed her down the hall to her office and studio.

In the work area, Taj proudly showed him the costume. "Groundlings wore different pieces for different parts of their body," she explained, holding up a pair of matching blue garments. "Pants for your legs and shirt for your upper body."

Mikel stripped off his one-piece nutrend garment, and with her help, he slipped into the groundling costume. He closed his eyes and stretched. Then he moved about the studio, darting around Taj's cluttered work area, bending, turning, twisting. The shirt and pants were loose, comfortable, allowing him ample freedom of movement. Finally, he stopped testing the new costume and grinned at her.

"What do you think?" she asked anxiously.

"You've done a terrific job," he answered, unexpectantly swooping her up in his arms for a hug and kiss. "They feel just right, look authentic I'm sure, and they don't hamper my movement at all."

Taj lingered for a moment in his arms, as if expecting something more...but Mikel released her, feeling embarrassed. And in the awkward silence, he quickly redressed in his nutrend.

He cleared his throat and said, "I need to call Aylin tonight about the possibility of going on tour. And, of course, I'm going to tell her about your research and terrific new costume design, too."

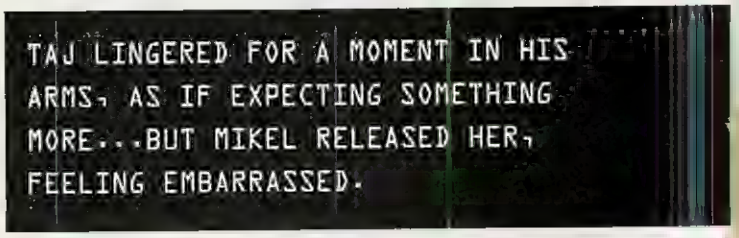
She just nodded as he quickly left the studio.

MIKEL WAS HALFWAY THROUGH HIS ROUTINE DURING THE Friday matinee, when he stumbled, almost falling flat on his face. He recovered and finished smoothly. But he knew then something was wrong with his legs — it was like they weren't responding properly.

Another clumsy performance Friday night.

Afterwards, the maestro looked worried and wanted to take Mikel to a small, private medcenter for an examination, but Mikel put him off, suggesting he was just tired, not used to the physical demands of two performances a day.

Saturday morning Mikel awakened to find the skin of the wing nubs splitting on his back.



A hurried visit to the private medcenter confirmed his suspicion: His wings were indeed beginning to grow back; and at the same time, he was losing leg strength.

Sunday, Mikel stumbled awkwardly through the entire matinee performance. The audience was subdued, sensing something very wrong, the applause only polite.

Before the evening performance, Mikel reluctantly went to see Maestro Tuvlo. He could no longer hide his developing wings and the change in leg strength.

It was over.

STEPPING OFF THE HUMMER, MIKEL SAW AYLIN FIRST and was immediately struck by her plain, provincial appearance — her drab nutrend, her guild tat, the gray wings. But he had no time to dwell on the difference between his wife's looks and the people in the City of Towers.

Music, applause, people laughing.

The whole village had turned out to greet his return. Shy children on their father's shoulders pointed at him across the crowded plaza.

During the party, all his old friends managed to come by and say hello, pounding his back. The president of the Stonecutters Guild personally returned his card. It was indeed like old times, maybe even better.

And Aylin was very happy.

The next morning at Aylin's insistence, Mikel made an appointment at the medcenter, where he underwent another thorough

Continued on page 94

NARROW

Hidden inside the huge alien artifact they called home was a mysterious planet that held hidden wonders and the ultimate terror.

BY ROBERT REED

MISSION YEAR 0.00:

Washen couldn't count all the captains spread out before her, and putting on her finest captainly smile, she joined them, trading the usual compliments, telling little stories about her travels, and with a genuine unease, asking if anyone knew why the Ship's Master would want to bring them here.

"She's testing us," one gray-eyed colleague ventured. "She's testing our obedience. Plus our security measures, too."

"Perhaps," Washen allowed.

Coded orders had found Washen through secure channels. Without explanation, the Master told her to abandon her post, discarding her uniform and taking on a suitable disguise. For the last seven days, she had played the role of dutiful tourist, wandering the vast ship, enjoying its wondrous sights, then after making triple-sure that she wasn't being monitored, boarding an anonymous tube-car that had brought her to this odd place.

"My name is Diu," said her companion, offering his hand and a wide smile.

She clasped the hand with both of hers, saying, "We met at the captains' banquet. Was it twenty years ago?"

"Twenty-five." Like most captains, Diu was tall for a human, with craggy features and an easy charm meant to instill trust in their human passengers. "It's kind of you to remember me. Thank you."

"You're most welcome."

The eyes brightened. "What do you think of the Master's tastes? Isn't this a bizarre place to meet?"

"Bizarre," Washen echoed. "That's a good word."

The !eech once lived here. An obscure species, ascetic by nature, they had built their home inside the remote confines of one of the ship's enormous fuel tanks. Weaving together thick plastics, they had dangled this place from the tank's insulated ceiling. Its interior, following an !eech logic, was a single room. Vast in two dimensions but with a glowing gray ceiling close enough to touch, the surroundings made every human feel claustrophobic. The only furnishings were hard gray pillows. The air was warm and stale, smelling of odd dusts and persistent pheromones. Colors were strictly forbidden. Even the gaudy tourists' clothes seemed to turn gray in the relentless light.

"I've been wondering," said Diu. "Whatever happened to the !eech?"

"I don't know," Washen confessed. She had met the species when they came on board. But that was more than a thousand years before, and even a captain's memory was imperfect.

The !eech could have simply reached their destination, disembarking without incident. Or they could have decided to build an even more isolated home, if that was possible. Or

perhaps some disaster had struck, and they were dead. Shipboard extinctions were more common than any captain would admit. Some of their passengers proved too frail to endure any long journey. Mass suicides and private wars claimed others. Yet as Washen often reminded herself, for every failed species, a hundred others thrived, or at least managed to etch out some little corner of this glorious ship where they could hold their own.

"Wherever the !eech are, I'm sure they're well."

"Of course they are," Diu replied, knowing what was polite. "Of course."

In the face of ignorance, captains should make positive sounds.

Washen noticed how even when standing still, Diu was moving, his flesh practically vibrating, as if the water inside him was ready to boil.

"So, Madam ... I'm dying to know what you think! What's our mission? What's so important that the Master pulls us all the way down here?"

"Yes," said a second voice. "What's your best bad guess, darling?"

Miocene had joined them. One of a handful of Submasters in attendance, she was rumored to be the Master's favorite. An imperious, narrow-faced woman, she was a full head taller than the others, dressed in rich robes, her brindle-colored hair brushing against the ceiling. Yet she stood erect, refusing to dip her head for the simple sake of comfort.

"Not that you know more than any of us," the Submaster persisted. "But what do you think the Master wants?"

The room seemed to grow quiet. Captains held their breath, secretly delighted that it was Washen who had to endure Miocene's attentions.

"Well," Washen began, "I can count several hundred clues."

A razor smile formed. "And they are?"

"Us." They were standing near one of the room's few window's — a wide slit of thick, distorting plastic. There was nothing outside but blackness and vacuum; an ocean of liquid hydrogen, vast and calm and brutally cold, lay some fifty kilometers below them. Nothing was visible in the window but their own murky reflections. Washen saw everyone at a glance. She regarded her own handsome, ageless face, black hair pulled back in a sensible bun and streaked with enough white to lend authority, her wide chocolate eyes betraying confidence with a twist of deserved pleasure. "The Master selected us, and we're the clues."

Miocene glanced at her own reflection. "And who are we?"

"The elite of the elite." Washen put names to the faces, listing bonuses and promotions earned over the last millennia. "Manka is a new second-grade. Aasleen was in charge of the last engine upgrade, which came in below budget and five months early. Saluki and Westfall have won the Master's award for duty ten times each." She gestured at the captain beside her, saying, "And there's Diu, of course. Already an eleventh-grade, which is astonishing. You came on board the ship — warn me if I'm wrong — as just another passenger."

The energetic man said, "True, madam. Thank you for remembering."

Washen grinned, then said, "And then there's you, Madam Miocene. You are one of three Submasters with first-chair status at the Master's table."

The tall woman nodded, enjoying the flattery. "But don't forget yourself, darling."

"I never do," Washen replied, earning a good laugh from everyone. And because nothing was more unseemly in a captain than false modesty, she admitted, "I've heard the rumors. I'm slated to become our newest Submaster."

Miocene grinned, but she made no comment about any rumors.

Instead she took an enormous breath, and in a loud voice asked, "Can you smell yourselves? Can you? That's the smell of ambition. No other scent is so tenacious, or in my mind, ever so sweet ... !"

NO NAME BUT THE SHIP WAS NECESSARY. ANCIENT AND spectacular, there was nothing else that could be confused with it, and everyone on board, from the Ship's Master to the most disreputable stowaway, was justifiably proud of their magnificent home.

The ship began as a jupiter-class world, but an unknown species had claimed it. Using its hydrogen atmosphere, they accelerated the core to a fraction of lightspeed. Then they built tunnels and compartments, plus chambers large enough to swallow small worlds. Premium hyperfibers lent strength and durability to the frame. And then, as with the !eech's plastic abode, the builders suddenly and mysteriously abandoned their creation.

Billions of years later, humans stumbled across the ship. Most of its systems were in a diagnostic mode. Human engineers woke them, making repairs where necessary. Then the best human captains were hired, and every manner of passenger was ushered aboard, the ship's maiden voyage calling for a half-million year jaunt around the Milky Way.

Its undisputed ruler arrived a few hours later.

Accompanied by a melody of horns and angel-voiced humans, the Master strode into the room. Where other captains were disguised in civilian clothes, their leader wore a mirrored cap and uniform that suited her office, and for many reasons, her chosen body was broad and extraordinarily deep. It was status, in part. But a Master also needed bulk to give her augmented brain a suitable home, thousands of ship functions constantly monitored and adjusted, in the same unconscious way that the woman moved and breathed.

Gravity was weaker this deep inside the ship. With one vast hand skating along the ceiling, the Master deftly kept herself from bumping her head. A dozen of the low-grade captains offered greetings and hard cushions. Diu was among the supplicants, on his knees and smiling, even after she had passed.

"Thank you for coming," said that voice that always took Washen by surprise. It was a quiet, unhurried voice, perpetually amused by whatever the radiant brown eyes were seeing. "I know you're puzzled," she said, "and I hope you're concerned. So let me begin with my compelling reasons for this game, and what I intend for you."

A handful of guards stood in the distance; Washen saw their tiny armored silhouettes as the room's lights fell to nothing.

"The ship, please."

A real-time projection blossomed beside the Master, channeled through her own internal systems. The spherical hull looked slick and gray. A thousand lasers were firing from the bow, aiming at comets and other hazards. Mammoth engines rooted in the stern spat out hurricanes of plasma, incrementally adjusting their course and speed. And a tiny flare on the equator meant that another starship was arriving. With new passengers, presumably.

"Now," said the amused voice, "start peeling the onion. Please."

In a blink, the hyperfiber hull was removed. Washen could suddenly make out the largest high-deck chambers; she knew each by name and purpose, just as she knew every important place too small to be seen. Then another few hundred kilometers of rock and water, air and hyperfiber were erased, exposing more landmarks.

"This perfect architecture." The Master stepped closer to the shrinking projection, its glow illuminating a wide strong self-assured face — a face designed to inspire thousands of captains, and a crew numbering in the tens of millions. "In my mind, there's been no greater epic in history. I'm not talking about this journey of ours. I mean about the astonishing task of exploring our ancient starship. Imagine the honor: To be the first living organism to step

into one of these chambers, the first sentient mind in billions of years to experience their vastness, their mystery. It was a magnificent time. And I'm talking first-hand, since I was one of the leaders of the first survey team ... "

It was an old, honorable boast, and her prerogative.

"We did a superlative job," she assured. "I won't accept any other verdict. Despite technical problems and the sheer enormity it, we mapped more than ninety-nine percent of the ship's interior. In fact, I was the first one to find my way through the plumbing above us, and the first to see the sublime beauty of the hydrogen sea below us ... "

Washen hid a smile, thinking: A fuel tank is a fuel tank is a fuel tank.

"Here we are," the Master announced. The projection had shrunk by a third. The fuel tank was a fist-sized cavern; the leech habitat was far too small to be seen. Then in the next moment, they were gone, another layer removed without sound or fuss. Liquid hydrogen turned into a blackish solid, and deeper still, a transparent metal. "These seas have always been the deepest features," she commented. "Below them, there's nothing but iron and a stew of other metals squashed under fantastic pressures."

The ship had been reduced to a perfectly smooth black ball — the essential ingredient in a multitude of popular games.

"Until now, we knew nothing about the core." The Master paused for a moment, allowing herself a quick grin. "Evidence shows that when the ship was built, its core was stripped of its radionuclides, probably to help cool the metals and keep them relatively stiff. We don't know how the builders managed the trick. But there used to be narrow tunnels leading down, all reinforced with hyperfibers and energy buttresses, and all eventually crushed by time and a lack of repair." A second pause, then she said, "Not enough room left for a single microchine to pass. Or so we've always believed."

Washen felt herself breathing faster, enjoying the moment.

"There has never, ever been the feeblest hint of hidden chambers," the Master proclaimed. "I won't accept criticism on this matter. Every possible test was carried out. Seismic. Neutrino imaging. Even palm-of-the-hand calculations of mass and volume. Until fifty-three years ago, there was no reason to fear that our maps weren't complete."

A silence had engulfed the audience.

Quietly, smoothly, the Master said, "The full ship. Please."

The iron ball was again dressed in rock and hyperfiber.

"Now the impact. Please."

Washen stepped forward, anticipating what she would see. Fifty-three years ago, they passed through a dense swarm of comets. The captains had thrown gobs of antimatter into the largest hazards. Lasers fired without pause, evaporating trillions of tons of ice. But debris still peppered the hull, a thousand pinpricks of light dancing on its silver-gray projection, and then came a blistering white flash that dwarfed the other explosions and left the captains blinking, remembering that moment, and the shared embarrassment.

A chunk of nickel-iron had slipped through their defenses. The ship rattled with the impact, and for months afterwards, nervous passengers talked about little else. Even when the captains showed them all of the schematics and calculations, proving that they could have absorbed an even larger impact before anyone was in real danger ... even then there people and aliens who insisted on being afraid.

With a palpable relish, the Master said, "Now the cross section, please."

Half of the ship evaporated. Pressure waves spread down and out from the blast site, then pulled together again at the stern, causing more damage before they bounced, and bounced back again, the diluted vibrations still detectable now, murmuring their way through the ship as well as through the captains' own bones.

"AI analysis. Please."

A map was aid over the cross section, every feature familiar. Save one.

"Madam," said a sturdy voice. Miocene's voice. "It's an anomaly, granted. But doesn't the feature seem rather ... unlikely ... ?"

"Which is why I thought it was nothing. And my trusted AI — part of my own neural net — agreed with me. This region is a change in composition. Nothing more." She paused for a long moment, watching her captains. Then with a gracious oversized smile, she admitted, "The possibility of a hollow core has to seem ludicrous."

Submasters and captains nodded with a ragged hopefulness.

Knowing they weren't ordered here because of an anomaly, Washen stepped closer. How large was it? Estimates were easy to make, but the simple math created some staggering numbers.

"Ludicrous," the Master repeated. "But then I thought back to when we were babies, barely a few thousand years old. Who would have guessed that a jupiter-class world could become a starship like ours?"

Just the same, thought Washen: Certain proposals will always be insane.

"But madam," said Miocene. "A chamber of those proportions would make us less massive. Assuming we know the densities of the intervening iron, of course ... "

"And you're assuming, of course, that the core is empty." The Master grinned at her favorite officer, then at all of them. For several minutes, her expression was serene, wringing pleasure out of their confusion and ignorance.

Then she reminded everyone, "This began as someone else's vessel. We shouldn't forget: We don't understand why our home was built. For all we know, it was a cargo ship. A cargo ship, and here is its hold."

The captains shuddered at the idea.

"Imagine that something is inside this chamber. Like any cargo, it would have to be restrained. A series of strong buttressing fields might keep it from rattling around every time we adjusted our course. And naturally, if the buttressing fields were rigid enough, then they would mask whatever is down there — "

"Madam," shouted someone, "please, what's down there ... ?"

Shouted Diu.

"A spherical object. It's the size of Mars, but considerably more massive." The Master grinned for a moment, then told the projection, "Please. Show them what I found."

The image changed again. Nestled inside the great ship was a world, black as iron and slightly smaller than the chamber surrounding it. The simple possibility of such an enormous, unexpected discovery didn't strike Washen as one revelation, but as many, coming in waves, making her gasp and shake her head as she looked at her colleagues' faces, barely seeing any of them.

"This world has an atmosphere," said the laughing voice, "with enough oxygen to be breathed, enough water for lakes and rivers, and all of the symptoms usually associated with a vigorous biosphere — "

"How do we know that?" Washen called out. Then, in a mild panic, "No disrespect intended, madam!"

"I haven't gone there myself, if that's what you're asking." She giggled like a child, telling them, "But after fifty years of secret work, using self-replicating drones to rebuild one of the old tunnels ... after all that, I'm able to stand here and assure you that not only does this world exist, but that each of you are going to see it for yourselves ... "

Washen glanced at Diu, wondering if her face wore that same wide smile.

"I have named the world, by the way. We'll call it Marrow." The Master winked and said, "For where blood is born, of course. And it's reserved for you ... my most talented, trustworthy friends ... !"

ONDERS HAD BEEN ACCOMPLISHED IN A FEW decades. Mole-like drones had gnawed their way through beds of nickel and iron, repairing one of the ancient tunnels; fleets of tube-cars had plunged to where the tunnel opened into the mysterious chamber, assembling a huge stockpile of supplies directly

above Marrow; then a brigade of construction drones threw together the captains' base camp — a sterile little city of dormitories, machine shops, and first-rate laboratories tucked within a transparent, airtight blister.

Washen was among the last to arrive. At the Master's insistence, she led a cleaning detail that stayed behind, erasing every trace of the captains' presence from the !eech habitat. It was a security precaution, and it required exacting work. And some of her people considered it an insult. "We aren't janitors," they grumbled. To which Washen replied, "You're right. Professionals would have finished last week."

Diu belonged to her detail, and unlike some, the novice captain worked hard to endear himself. He was probably calculating that she would emerge from this mission as a Submaster and his benefactor. But there was nothing wrong in calculations, Washen believed — as long as the work was done, successes piled high and honors for everyone.

Only tiny, two passenger tube-cars could make the long fall to the base camp. Washen decided that Diu would provide comfortable company. He rewarded her with his life story, including how he came into the captains' ranks. "After a few thousand years of being a wealthy passenger, I realized that I was bored." He said it with a tone of confession, and amusement. "But you captains never look bored. Pissed, yes. And harried, usually. But that's what attracted me to you. If only because people expect it, captains can't help seem relentlessly, importantly busy."

Washen had to admit, it was a unique journey into the ship's elite.

At journey's end, their car pulled into the first empty berth. On foot, Diu and Washen conquered the last kilometer, stepping abruptly out onto viewing platform, and not quite standing together, peering over the edge.

A tinted airtight blister lay between them and several hundred kilometers of airless, animated space. Force fields swirled through that vacuum, creating an array of stubborn, stable buttresses. The buttresses were visible as a brilliant blue-white light that flowed from everywhere, filling the chamber. The light never seemed to weaken. Even with the blister's protection, the glare was intense. Relentless. Eyes had to adapt — a physiological change that would take several ship-days — and even still, no one grew accustomed to the endless day.

Even inside her bedroom, windows blackened and the covers thrown over her head, a captain could feel the radiance piercing her flesh just so it could tickle her bones.

The chamber wall was blanketed with a thick mass of gray-white hyperfiber, and the wall was their ceiling, falling away on all sides until it vanished behind Marrow.

"Marrow," Washen whispered, spellbound.

On just the sliver of the world beneath them, the captain saw a dozen active volcanoes, plus a wide lake of bubbling iron. In cooler basins, hot-water streams ran into colorful, mineral-stained lakes. Above them, water clouds were gathering into enormous thunderheads. When the land wasn't exploding, it was a rugged shadowless black, and the blackness wasn't just because of the iron-choked soils. Vigorous, soot-colored vegetation basked in the endless day. And they were a blessing. From what the captains could see, the forests were acting as powerful filters, scrubbing the atmosphere until it was clean, at least to where humans, if conditioned properly, should be able to breathe, perhaps even comfortably.

"I want to get down there," Washen confessed.

"It's going to take time," Diu warned, pointing over her shoulder.

Above the blister, dormitories and machine shops were dangling from the hyperfiber, their roofs serving as foundations. Past them, at the blister's edge, the captains were assembling a silvery-white cylinder. It would eventually form a bridge to Marrow. There was no other way down. The buttress fields killed transports, and for many reasons, unprotected minds eroded in an instant, and died. To beat the challenge, their best engineer, Aasleen, had designed a shaft dressed in hyperfibers, its interior shielded with ceramics and superfluids. Theories claimed that the danger ended with Marrow's atmosphere, but just to be safe, several hundred immortal pigs and baboons were in cages, waiting to put those guesses to the test.

Washen was thinking about the baboons, and timetables.

A familiar voice broke her reverie.

"What are your impressions, darlings?"

Miocene stood behind them. In uniform, she was even more imposing, and more cold. Yet Washen summoned her best smile, greeting the mission leader, then adding, "I'm surprised. I didn't know it would be this beautiful."

"Is it?" The knife-edged face offered a smile. "Is there any beauty here, Diu?"

"A spartan kind of beauty," Diu replied.

"I wouldn't know. I don't have any feel for aesthetics." The Submaster smiled off into the distance. "Tell me. If this world proves harmless and beautiful, what do you think our passengers will pay for the chance to come here?"

"If it's a little dangerous," Washen ventured, "they would pay more."

Miocene's smile came closer, growing harder. "And if it's deadly, maybe we'll have to collapse the tunnel again. With us safely above, of course."

"Of course," the captains echoed.

Diu was grinning, with his face, and if possible, with his entire body.

Mirrors and antennae clung to hyperfiber, gazing at Marrow. He gestured at them, asking, "Have we seen any signs of intelligence, madam? Or artifacts of any sort?"

"No," said Miocene, "and no."

It would be a strange place for sentience to evolve, thought Washen. And if the builders had left ruins behind, they would have been destroyed long ago. The crust beneath them wasn't even a thousand years old. Marrow was an enormous forge, constantly reworking its face as well as the bones beneath.

"I can't help it," Diu confessed. "I keep dreaming that the builders are down there, waiting for us."

"A delirious dream," Miocene warned him.

But Washen felt the same way. She could almost see the builders slathering the hyperfiber, then building Marrow. This was a huge place, and they couldn't see more than a sliver of it from their tiny vantage point. Who knew what they would eventually find?

Diu couldn't stop talking. "This is fantastic," he said. "And an honor. I'm just pleased that the Master would include me."

The Submaster nodded, conspicuously saying nothing.

"Now that I'm here," Diu blubbered, "I can almost see the purpose of this place."

With a level glance, Washen tried to tell her companion, Shut up.

But Miocene had already tilted her head, eyeing their eleventh-grade colleague. "I'd love to hear your theories, darling."

Diu lifted his eyebrows.

An instant later, with bleak amusement, he remarked, "I think not." Then he looked at his own hands, saying, "Once spoken, madam, a thought hides inside at least one other."

MISSION YEAR 103:

Planetfall was exactly as the captains had planned — a routine day from the final five kilometers of bridge building to Miocene's first steps on the surface. And with success came cheers and singing, followed by ample late suppers served with bottomless glasses of well-chilled

champagne, and congratulations from the distant Master.

Except for Washen, the day was just a little disappointing.

Watching from base camp, studying data harvests and live images, she saw exactly what she expected to see. Captains were administrators, not explorers; the historic moments were relentlessly organized. The landscape had been mapped until every bush and bug had a name. Not even tiny surprises could ambush the first teams. It was thorough and stifling, but naturally Washen didn't mention her disappointment, or even put a name to her emotions. Habit is habit, and she had been an exemplary captain for thousands of years. Besides, what sort of person would she be if she was offended that there were no injuries, or mistakes, or troubles of any kind?

And yet.

Two ship-days later, when her six-member team was ready to embark, Washen had to make herself sound like a captain. With a forced sincerity, she told the others, "We'll take our walk on the iron, and we'll exceed every objective. On schedule, if not before."

It was a swift, strange trip to Marrow.

Diu asked to ride with Washen, just as he'd requested to be part of her team. Their shielded tube-car retreated back up the access tunnel, then flung itself at Marrow, streaking through the buttress fields to minimize the exposure, a trillion electric fingers delicately playing with their sanity.

Then their car reached the upper atmosphere and braked, the terrific gees bruising flesh and shattering minor bones.

Artificial genes began weaving protein analogs, knitting their injuries.

The bridge was rooted into a hillside of cold iron and black jungle. The rest of the team and their supplies followed. Despite an overcast sky, the air was brilliant and furnace-hot, every breath tasting of metal and nervous sweat. As team leader, Washen gave orders that everyone knew by heart. Cars were linked, then reconfigured. The new vehicle was loaded, and tested, and the captains were tested by their autodocs: Newly implanted genes were helping their bodies adapt to the heat and metal-rich environment. Then Miocene, sitting in a nearby encampment, contacted them and gave her blessing, and Washen lifted off, steering towards the purely arbitrary north-northwest.

The countryside was broken and twisted, split by fault lines and raw mountains and volcanic vents. The vents had been quiet for a century or a decade, or in some cases, days. Yet the surrounding land was alive, adorned with jungle, pseudotrees reminiscent of mushrooms, all enormous, all pressed against one another, their lacquered black faces feeding on the dazzling blue-white light.

Marrow seemed as durable as the captains flying above it.

Growth rates were phenomenal, and for more reasons than photosynthesis. Early findings showed that the jungle also fed through its roots, chisel-like tips reaching down to where thermophilic bacteria thrived, Marrow's own heat supplying easy calories.

Were the aquatic ecosystems as productive?

It was Washen's question, and she'd selected a small, metal-choked lake for study. They arrived on schedule, and after circling the lake twice, as prescribed, she landed on a slab of bare iron. Then for the rest of the day they set up their lab and quarters, and specimen traps, and as a precaution, installed a defense perimeter — three paranoid AIs who did nothing but think the worst of every bug and spore that happened past.

Night was mandatory. Miocene insisted that each captain sleep at least four hours, and invest another hour in food and toiletries.

Washen's team went to bed on time, then lay awake until it was time to rise.

At breakfast, they sat in a circle and gazed at the sky. The chamber's wall was smooth and ageless, and infinitely bland. Base camp was a dark blemish visible only because the air was exceptionally clear. The bridge had vanished with the distance. If Washen was very careful, she could almost believe that they were the only people on this world. If she was lucky, she forgot for a minute or two that telescopes were watching her sitting on her aerogel chair, eating her scheduled rations.

Diu sat nearby, and when she glanced at him, he smiled wistfully, as if he could read her thoughts.

"I know what we need," Washen announced.

Diu said, "What do we need?"

"A ceremony. Some ritual before we can start." She rose and walked to one of the specimen traps, returning with one of their first catches. On Marrow, pseudoinsects filled almost every animal niche. Six-winged dragonflies were blue as gemstones and longer than a forearm. With the other captains watching, Washen stripped the dragonfly of its wings and tail, then eased the rest into their autokitchen. The broiling took a few seconds. With a dull thud, the carcass exploded inside the oven. Then she grabbed a lump of the blackish meat, and with a grimace, made herself bite and chew.

"We aren't supposed to," Diu warned, laughing gently.

Washen forced herself to swallow, then she told everyone, "And you won't want to do it again. Believe me."

There were no native viruses to catch, or toxins that their reinforced genetics couldn't handle. Miocene was simply being a cautious mother when she told them, "Except in emergencies, eat only the safe rations."

Washen passed out the ceremonial meat.

Last to take his share was Diu, and his first bite was tiny. But he didn't grimace, and with an odd little laugh, he told Washen, "It's not bad. If my tongue quit burning, I could almost think about enjoying it."

MISSION YEAR 1.22:

AFTER WEEKS OF RELENTLESS WORK, CERTAIN possibilities began to look like fact.

Marrow had been carved straight from the jupiter's heart. Its composition and their own common sense told the captains as much. The builders had first wrenched the uraniums and thoriums from the overhead iron, injecting them deep into the core. Then with the buttressing fields, the molten sphere was compressed, and the exposed chamber walls were slathered in hyperfiber. And billions of years later, without help from the vanished builders, the machinery was still purring along quite nicely.

But why bother creating such a marvel?

Marrow could be a dumping ground for radionuclides. Or it could have worked as an enormous fission reactor, some captains suggested. Except there were easier ways to create power, others pointed out, their voices not so gently dismissive.

But what if the world was designed to store power?

It was Aasleen's suggestion: By tweaking the buttresses, the builders could have forced Marrow to rotate. With patience — a resource they must have had in abundance — they could have given it a tremendous velocity. Spinning inside a vacuum, held intact by the buttresses, the iron ball would have stored phenomenal amounts of energy — enough to maintain the on board systems for billions of years, perhaps.

Washen first heard the flywheel hypothesis at the weekly briefing.

Each of the team leaders was sitting at the illusion of a conference table, in aerogel chairs, sweating rivers in Marrow's heat. The surrounding room was sculpted from light, and sitting at the head of the table was the Master's projection, alert but unusually quiet. She expected crisp reports and upbeat attitudes. Grand theories were a surprise. Finally, after a contemplative pause, she smiled, telling the captain, "That's an intriguing possibility. Thank you, Aasleen." Then to the others, "Considerations? Any?"

Her smile brought a wave of complimentary noise.

In private, Washen doubted they were inside someone's dead battery. But this wasn't the polite moment to list the troubles with fly-

wheels. And besides, the bio-teams were reporting next, and she was eager to compare notes.

A tremor suddenly shook the captains, one after another, spreading out from its distant epicenter. Even for Marrow, that was a big jolt.

Compliments dissolved into an alert silence.

Then the Master lifted her wide hand, announcing abruptly, "We need to discuss your timetable."

What about the bio-teams?

"You're being missed, I'm afraid. Our cover story isn't clever enough, and the crew are suspicious." The Master lowered her hand, then said, "Before people are too worried, I want to bring you home."

Smiles broke out.

Some were tired of Marrow; other captains were tickled with the prospects of honors and promotions.

"Everyone, madam?" Washen dared.

"At least temporarily."

According to the ship's duty roster, the missing captains were visiting a nearby solar system, serving as travel agents to billions of potential passengers. And the truth told, there'd been boring moments when Washen found herself wishing that the fiction was real. But not today. Not when she was in the middle of something fascinating ... !

As mission leader, it was Miocene's place to ask:

"Do you want us to cut our work short, madam?"

The Master squinted at the nearest window, gazing out at one of the ship's port facilities. For her, the room and its view were genuine, and her captains were illusions.

"Mission plans can be rewritten," she told them. "I want you to finish surveying the far hemisphere, and I want the critical studies wrapped up. Ten ship-days should be adequate. Then you'll come home, and we'll take our time deciding on our next actions."

Smiles wavered, but none crumbled.

Miocene whispered, "Ten days," with a tentative respect.

"Is that a problem?"

"Madam," the Submaster began, "I would feel much more comfortable if we were certain that Marrow isn't a threat."

There was a pause, and not just because the Master was thousands of kilometers removed from them. It was a lengthy, unnerving silence. Then captains' captain looked off into the distance, saying, "Considerations? Any?"

It would be a disruption. The other Submasters agreed with Miocene. To accomplish their work in ten days, with confidence, would require every captain, including those stationed with the support teams. Their base camp would have to be abandoned temporarily. That was an acceptable risk, perhaps. But mild words were obscured by clenched fists and distant, worried gazes.

Unsatisfied, the Master turned to her future Submaster. "Do you have any considerations to add?"

Washen hesitated as long as she dared.

"Marrow could have been a flywheel," she finally allowed. "Madam."

Brown eyes closed, opened. "I'm sorry," the Master responded, the voice devoid of amusement. "Aren't we discussing your timetable?"

"But if these buttresses ever weakened," Washen continued, "even for an instant, the planet would have expanded instantly. Catastrophically. The surrounding hyperfiber would have vaporized, and a shock wave would have passed through the entire ship, in moments." She offered simple calculations, then added, "Maybe this was an elaborate flywheel. But it also would have made an effective self-destruct mechanism. We don't know, madam. We don't know if the builders had enemies, real or imagined. But if we're going to find answers, I can't think of a better place to look."

The Master's face was unreadable, impenetrable.

Finally she shook her head, smiling in a pained. "Since my first moment on board this glorious vessel, I have nourished one guiding principle: The builders, whomever they were, would never endanger this marvelous creation."

Washen wished for the same confidence.

Then that apparition of light and sound leaned forward, saying, "You need a change of duty, Washen. I want you and your team in the lead. Help us explore the far hemisphere. And once the surveys are finished, everyone comes home. Agreed?"

"As you wish, madam," said Washen.

Said everyone.

Then Washen caught Miocene's surreptitious glance, something in the eyes saying, "Nice try, darling." And with that look, the faintest hint of respect.

PTEROSAUR DRONES HAD ALREADY DRAWN three maps of the region. Yet as Washen passed overhead, she realized that even the most recent map, drawn eight days ago, was too old to be useful.

Battered by quakes, the landscape had been heaved skyward, then torn open. Molten iron flowed into an oxbow lake, boiling water and mud, and columns of dirty steam rose skyward, then twisted to the east. As an experiment, Washen flew into the steam clouds. Samples were ingested through filters and sensors and simple lensing chambers. Riding with the steam were spores and eggs, encased in tough bioceramics and indifferent to the heat. Inside the tip of the needle flask, too small to see with the naked eye, were enough pond weeds and finned beetles to conquer ten new lakes.

Catastrophe was the driving force on Marrow.

That insight struck Washen every day, sometimes hourly, and it always arrived with a larger principle in tow:

In some flavor or another, disaster ruled every world.

But Marrow was the ultimate example. And as if to prove itself, the steam clouds dispersed suddenly, giving way to the sky's light, the chamber wall overhead, and far below, for as far as Washen could see, the stark black bones of a jungle.

Fumes and fire had incinerated every tree, every scrambling bug.

The carnage must have been horrific. Yet the blaze had passed days ago, and new growth was already pushing up from the gnarled trunks and fresh crevices, thousands of glossy black umbrella-like leaves shining in the superheated air.

Washen decided to blank the useless maps, flying on instinct.

"Twenty minutes, and we're as far from the bridge as possible," Diu promised, his smile wide and infectious.

No other team would travel as far.

Washen started to turn, intending to order chilled champagne for the occasion, her mouth opened and a distorted, almost inaudible voice interrupting her.

"Report ... all teams ... !"

It was Miocene's voice strained through a piercing electronic whistle.

"What do ... see ... ?" asked the Submaster. "Teams ... report ... !"

Washen tried establishing more than an audio link, and failed.

A dozen other captains were chattering in a ragged chorus. Zale said, "We're on schedule. Kyzkee observed, "There's some com-interference ... otherwise, systems appear nominal." Then with more curiosity than worry, Aasleen inquired, "Why, madam? Is something wrong?"

There was a long, jangled hum.

Diu was hunched over sensor displays, and with a tight little voice, he said, "Shit."

"What — ?" Washen cried out.

Then a shrill cry swept away every voice, every thought. And the day brightened and brightened, fat bolts of lightning flowing across the sky, then turning, moving with purpose, aiming for them.

From the far side of the world came a twisted voice:

"The bridge ... where is it ... do you see it ... where ... ?"

The car bucked as if panicking, losing thrust and altitude, then its

AIs. Washen deployed the manual controls, and centuries of drills made her concentrate, nothing existing but their tumbling vehicle, her syrupy reflexes, and an expanse of burnt forest.

The next barrage of lightning was purple-white, and brighter, nothing visible but its seething glare.

Washen flew blind, flew by memory.

Their car was designed to endure heroic abuse, the same as its passengers. But it was dead and its hull had been degraded, and when it struck the iron ground, the hull shattered. Restraining fields grabbed bodies, then failed. Nothing but mechanical belts and gas bags held the captains in their seats. Flesh was jerked and twisted, and shredded. Bones were shattered and wrenched from their sockets. Then the seats were torn free of the floor, and like useless wreckage, scattered across several hectares of iron and burnt stumps.

Washen never lost consciousness.

With numbed curiosity, she watched her own legs and arms break, and a thousand bruises spread into a single purple tapestry, every rib crushed to dust and her reinforced spine splintering until she was left without pain or a shred of mobility. Washen couldn't move her head, and her words were slow and watery, the sloppy mouth filled with cracked teeth and dying blood.

"Abandon," she muttered.

Then, "Ship," and she was laughing feebly. Desperately.

A gray sensation rippled through her body.

Emergency genes were already awake, finding their home in a shambles. They immediately protected the brain, flooding it with oxygen and anti-inflammatories, plus a blanket of comforting narcotics. Then they began to repair the vital organs and spine, cannibalizing meat for raw materials and energy, the captain's body wracked with fever, sweating salt water and blood, and after a little while, the body grew noticeably smaller.

An hour after the crash, a wrenching pain swept through Washen. It was a favorable sign. She squirmed and wailed, and with weak hands, freed herself from her ruined chair. Then with her sloppy rebuilt legs, she forced herself to stand.

Washen was suddenly twenty centimeters shorter, and frail. But she was able to limp over to Diu's body, finding him shriveled and in agony, but defiant — a fierce grin and a wink, then he told her, "You look gorgeous, madam. As always."

The others were alive, too. But not one machine in the wreckage would operate, not even well enough to say, "I'm broken."

The six captains healed within a day, and waited at the crash site, eating their rations to reclaim their size and vigor. No rescue team arrived. Whatever crippled their car must have done the same everywhere, they decided. Miocene was as powerless as them. And that left them with one viable option:

If Washen and the others wanted help, they were going to have to walk halfway around Marrow to find it.

MISSION YEAR 4.43:

THE BRIDGE RESEMBLED A RIGID THREAD, SILVERY and insubstantial. Sheered off in the high stratosphere, it was far too short to serve as an escape route. But it made a useful landmark. Washen's team steered for the bridge during those last days, picking their way across the knife-like ridges and narrow valleys between. Wondering what they would find, whenever they rested — for a moment, now and again — they let themselves talk in hopeful tones, imagining the other captains' surprise when the six of them suddenly marched out of the jungle.

Except when they arrived at the bridge, there was no one to catch off guard. The main encampment had been abandoned. The hilltop where the bridge was rooted had been split open by quakes, and the entire structure tilted precariously toward the east. A simple iron post kept the main doors propped open, and there was a makeshift ladder in the shaft, but judging by the rust, nobody had used it for months. Or perhaps years.

A sketchy path lead west. They followed, and after a long while, they came to a fertile river bottom and wider paths. With Washen at the lead, they were jogging, and it was Miocene who suddenly stepped into view, surprising them.

The Submaster was unchanged.

In uniform, she looked regal and well-chilled. "It took you long enough," she deadpanned. Then she smiled, adding, "It's good to see you. Honestly, we'd nearly given up hope."

Washen swallowed her anger.

The other captains bombarded Miocene with questions. Who else had survived? How were they making due? Did any machines work? Had the Master been in contact with them? Then Diu asked, "What kind of relief mission is coming?"

"It's a cautious relief mission," Miocene replied. "So cautious that it seems almost nonexistent."

Her captains had built telescopes from scratch, and at least one captain was always watching the base camp overhead. The transparent blister was intact. Every building was intact. But the drones and beacons were dead, which meant that the reactor was offline. A three kilometer stub of the bridge would make the perfect foundation for a new structure. But there wasn't any sign that captains, or anyone, was trying to mount any kind of rescue.

"The Master thinks we're dead," Diu offered, trying to be charitable.

"We aren't dead," Miocene countered. "And even if we were, she should be a little more interested in our bones, and answers."

Washen didn't talk. After three years of jogging, eating lousy food and forcing hope, she suddenly felt sickened and achingly tired.

The Submaster led them along a wide trail, working back through their questions.

"Every machine was ruined by the Event. That's our name for what happened. The Event left our cars and drones and sensors as fancy trash, and we can't fix them. And we can't decide why, either." Then she offered a distracted smile, adding, "But we're surviving. Wooden homes, with roofs. Iron tools. Pendulum clocks. Steam power when we go to the trouble, and enough homemade equipment, like the telescopes, that we can do some simple, simple science."

The jungle's understory had been cut down and beaten back, and the new encampment stretched out on all sides. Like anything built by determined captains, the place was orderly, perhaps to a fault. The houses were clean and in good repair. Paths were marked with logs, and someone had given each path its own name. Everyone was in uniform, and everyone was smiling, trying to hide the weariness in the eyes and their voices.

A hundred captains shouted, "Hello! Welcome!"

Washen stared at their faces, and counted, and finally forced herself to ask, "Who isn't here?"

Miocene recited a dozen names.

Eleven of them were friends or acquaintances of Washen's. The last name was Hazz — a Submaster and a voyage-long friend of Miocene's. "Two months ago," she explained, "he was exploring a nearby valley. A fissure opened up suddenly, without warning, and he was trapped by the flowing iron." Her eyes were distant, unreadable. "Hazz was perched on a little island that was melting. We tried to build a bridge, and tried to divert the current. Everything half-possible, we tried."

Washen stared at the narrow face, at the way the eyes had grown empty, and it was suddenly obvious that Miocene had been more than friends with the dead man.

"The island shrank," she told them, her voice too flat and slow. "It was a knob, if that. Hazz's boots dissolved, and his feet were boiling, and his flesh caught fire. But he managed to stand there. He endured it. He endured it and even managed to turn and take a step toward on us, on his boiling legs, and he fell forward, and that's when he finally died."

Washen had been mistaken. This wasn't the same Miocene.

"I have one goal," the Submaster confessed. "I want to find a way to get back to the Master, and I'll ask her why she sent us here. Was it to explore? Or was it just the best awful way to get rid of us ... ?"

MISSION YEAR 6.55:

THE IRON CRUST RIPPLED AND TORE APART UNDER A barrage of quakes, and with its foundation shattered, the bridge pitched sideways with a creaking roar, then shattered, the debris field scattered over fifty kilometers of newborn mountains.

Its fall was inevitable, and unrecorded. Geysers of white-hot metal had already obliterated the captains' encampment, forcing them to flee with a minimum of tools and provisions. Lungs were seared. Tongues and eyes were blistered. But the captains eventually stumbled into a distant valley, into a grove of stately trees, where they collapsed, gasping and cursing. Then as if to bless them, the trees began releasing tiny balloons made from gold, and the shady, halfway cool air was filled with the balloons' glint and the dry music made by their brushing against one another.

Diu coined the name virtue tree.

Miocene set her captains to planning new streets and houses, several of the virtue trees already downed when the ground ripped open with an anguished roar.

Wearily, the captains fled again, and when they settled, finally, they built strong simple houses that could be rebuilt anywhere in a ship's day.

Nomadic blood took hold in them. When they weren't stockpiling food for the next migration, they were building lighter tools, and when they weren't doing either, they studied their world, trying to guess its fickle moods.

Washen assembled a team of twenty observant captains.

"Breeding cycles are key," she reported. Sitting in the meeting hall, looking up and down the iron table, she reported that virtue trees spun their golden balloons only when the crust turned unstable. "If we see another show like the last one," she promised, "we're screwed. We've got a day, or less, to get out of here."

Staff meetings were patterned after conferences with the Master, except they came on an irregular schedule, and Miocene presided, and despite her best intentions, the captains kept the atmosphere informal, even jocular, and because of the absence of soap, more than a little sour.

"How are our virtue trees acting?" asked Aasleen.

"As if they'll live forever," Washen replied. "They're still happy, still early in their growth cycle. As far as we can tell."

Miocene acted distant that day. Squinting at nothing, she repeated the word:

"Cycles."

Everyone turned in their heavy chairs, and waited.

"Thank you, Washen." The Submaster rose and looked at each of them, then admitted, "This may be premature. I could be wrong for many reasons. But I think I've been able to find another cycle ... one that's unexpected, at least for me ... "

There was the distant droning of a hammerwing, and then, silence.

"Volcanic activity is escalating. I think that's obvious." The tall woman nodded for a moment, then asked, "But why? My proposal is that the buttresses have begun to relax their hold on Marrow. Not by much. Certainly nothing we can measure directly. But if it did happen, the metals under us are going to expand, and that's why, according to my careful computations, our home is growing larger."

Washen's first impulse was to laugh; it was a joke.

"Several kilometers larger," Miocene told the stunned faces. "I've gathered several lines of evidence. The buttresses' light has diminished by two or three percent. The horizon is a little more distant. And what's most impressive, I think: I've triangulated the distance to our base camp, and it's definitely closer than it was last year."

A dozen explanations occurred to Washen, but she realized that Miocene must have seen them, then discarded them.

"If Marrow isn't teasing us," said the Submaster, "and if the buttresses doesn't reverse the cycle, then you can see where we're going — "

Washen cried out, "How long will it take, madam?"

A dozen captains shouted the same question.

"The calculations aren't promising," Miocene replied. But she had to laugh in a soft, bitter way. "At the present rate, we'll be able to touch that three kilometer stub of the bridge in about five thousand years ... "

MISSION YEAR 88.55:

IT WAS TIME FOR THE CHILDREN TO SLEEP.

Washen had come to check on them. But for some reason she stopped short of the nursery, eavesdropping on them, uncertain why it was important to remain hidden.

The oldest boy was telling a story.

"We call them the Builders," he said, "because they created the ship."

"The ship," whispered the other children, in one voice.

"The ship is too large to measure, and it is very beautiful. But when it was new, there was no one to share it with the Builders, and no one to tell them that it was beautiful. That's why they called out into the darkness, inviting others to come fill its vastness."

Washen leaned against the fragrant umbra wood, waiting.

"Who came from the darkness?" asked the boy.

"The Bleak," young voices answered, instantly.

"Was there anyone else?"

"No one."

"Because the universe was so young," the boy explained. "Only the Bleak and the Builders had already evolved."

"The Bleak," a young girl repeated, with feeling.

"They were a cruel, selfish species," the boy maintained, "but they always wore smiles and said the smartest words."

"They wanted the ship," the others prompted.

"And they stole it. In one terrible night, as the Builders slept, the Bleak attacked, slaughtering most of them in their beds."

Every child whispered, "Slaughtered."

Washen eased her way closer to the nursery door. The boy was sitting up on his cot, his face catching the one sliver of light that managed to slip through the ceiling. Till was his name. He looked very much like his mother for a moment, then he moved his head slightly, and he resembled no one else.

"Where did the survivors retreat?" he asked.

"To Marrow."

"And from here, what did they do?"

"They purified the ship."

"They purified the ship," he repeated, with emphasis. "They swept its tunnels and chambers free of the scourge. The Builders had no choice."

There was a long, reflective pause.

"What happened to the last of the Builders?" he asked.

"They were trapped here," said the others, on cue. "And one after another, they died here."

"What died?"

"Their flesh."

"But what else is there?"

"The spirit."

"What isn't flesh cannot die," said the young prophet.

Washen waited, wondering when she had last taken a breath.

Then in whisper, Till asked, "Where do their spirits live?"

With a palpable delight, the children replied, "They live inside us."

"We are the Builders now," the voice assured. "After a long lonely wait, we've finally been reborn ... !"

Mission Year 88.90:

LIFE ON MARROW HAD BECOME HALFWAY COMFORTABLE and almost predictable. The captains weren't often caught by surprise eruptions, and they'd learned where the crust was likely to remain thick and stable for years at a time. With so much success, children had seemed inevitable; Miocene decided that every female captain should produce at least one. And like children anywhere, theirs filled many niches: They were fresh faces, and they were cherished distractions, and they were entertainment, and more than anyone anticipated, they were challenges to the captains' authority. But what Miocene wanted, first and always, were willing helpers. Till and his playmates were born so that someday, once trained, they could help their parents escape from Marrow.

The hope was that they could rebuild the bridge. Materials would be a problem, and Marrow would fight them. But Washen was optimistic. In these last eight decades, she'd tried every state of mind, and optimism far and away was the most pleasant.

And she tried to be positive everywhere: Good, sane reasons had kept them from being rescued. There was no one else the Master could trust like her favorite captains. Perhaps. Or she was thinking of the ship's wellbeing, monitoring Marrow from a distance. Or most likely, the access tunnel had totally collapsed during the Event, and digging them out was grueling, achingly slow work.

Other captains were optimistic in public, but in private, in their lovers' beds, they confessed to darker moods.

"What if the Master has written us off?" Diu posed the question, then offered an even worse scenario. "Or maybe something's happened to her. This was a secret mission. If she died unexpectedly, and if the First-chairs don't even know we're here ... "

"Do you believe that?" Washen asked.

Diu shrugged his shoulders.

"There's another possibility," she said, playing the game. "What if everyone else on the ship has died?"

For a moment, Diu didn't react.

"The ship was a derelict," she reminded him. "No one knows what happened to its owners, or to anyone else who's used it since."

"What are you saying?" Diu sat up in bed, dropping his legs over the edge. "You mean the crew and the passengers ... all of them have been killed ... ?"

"Maybe the ship cleans itself out every hundred thousand years."

A tiny grin emerged. "So how did we survive?"

"Life on Marrow is spared," she argued. "Otherwise, all of this would be barren iron and nothing else."

Diu pulled one of his hands across his face.

"This isn't my story," she admitted, placing her hand on his sweaty back. Their infant son, Locke, was sleeping in the nearby crib, blissfully unaware of their grim discussion. In three years, he would live in the nursery. With Till, she was thinking. Washen had overheard the story about the Builders and the Bleak several months ago, but she never told anyone. Not even Diu. "Have you ever listened to the children?"

Glancing over his shoulder, he asked, "Why?"

She explained, in brief.

A sliver of light caught his gray eye and cheek. "You know Till," Diu countered. "You know how odd he can seem."

"That's why I never mention it."

"Have you heard him tell that story again?"

"No," she admitted.

Her lover nodded, looking at the crib. At Locke.

"Children are imagination machines," he warned. "You never know what they're going to think about anything."

He didn't say another word.

Washen was remembering her only other child — a long-ago foster child, only glancingly human — and with a bittersweet grin, she replied, "But that's the fun in having them ... or so I've always heard ... "

Mission Year 89.09:

THE BOY WAS WALKING ALONE, CROSSING THE PUBLIC round with his eyes watching his own bare feet, watching them shuffle across the heat-baked iron.

"Hello, Till."

Pausing, he lifted his gaze slowly, a smile waiting to shine at the captain. "Hello, Madam Washen. You're well, I trust."

Under the blue glare of the sky, he was a polite, scrupulously ordinary boy. He had a thin face joined to a shorter, almost blockish body, and like most children, he wore as little as the adults let him wear. No one knew which of several captains was his genetic father. Miocene never told. She wanted to be his only parent, grooming him to stand beside her someday, and whenever Washen looked at Till, she felt a nagging resentment, petty as can be, and since it was directed at a ten year old, simply foolish.

With her own smile, Washen said, "I have a confession to make. A little while ago, I overheard you and the other children talking. You were telling each other a story."

The eyes were wide and brown, and they didn't so much as blink.

"It was an interesting story," Washen conceded.

Till looked like any ten year old who didn't know what to make of a bothersome adult. Sighing wearily, he shifted his weight from one brown foot to the other. Then he sighed again, the picture of boredom.

"How did you think up that story?" she asked.

A shrug of the shoulders. "I don't know."

"We talk about the ship. Probably too much." Her explanation felt sensible and practical. Her only fear was that she would come across as patronizing. "Everyone likes to speculate. About the ship's past, and its builders, and all the rest. It has to be confusing. Since we're going to rebuild our bridge, with your help ... it does make you into a kind of builder ... "

Till shrugged again, his eyes looking past her.

On the far side of the round, in front of the encampment's shop, a team of captains had fired up their latest turbine — a primitive wonder built from memory and trial-and-error. Homebrewed alcohols combined with oxygen, creating a delicious roar. When it was working, the engine was powerful enough to do any job they could offer it, at least today. But it was dirty and noisy, and the sound of it almost obscured the boy's voice.

"I'm not speculating," he said softly.

"Excuse me?"

"I won't tell you that. That I'm making it up."

Washen had to smile, asking, "Aren't you?"

"No." Till shook his head, then looked back down at his toes. "Madam Washen," he said with a boy's fragile patience. "You can't make up something that's true."

Mission Year 114.41:

LOCKE WAS WAITING IN THE SHADOWS — A GROWN MAN with a boy's guilty face and the wide, restless eyes of someone expecting trouble to come from every direction.

His first words were, "I shouldn't be doing this."

But a moment later, responding to an anticipated voice, he said, "I know, Mother. I promised."

Washen never made a sound.

It was Diu who offered second thoughts. "If this is going to get you

in trouble ... maybe we should go home ... "

"Maybe you should," their son allowed. Then he turned and walked away, never inviting them to follow, knowing they wouldn't be able to help themselves.

Washen hurried, feeling Diu in her footsteps.

A young jungle of umbra trees and lambda bush dissolved into rugged bare iron: Black pillars and arches created an indiscriminate, infuriating maze. Every step was a challenge. Razored edges sliced at exposed flesh. Bottomless crevices threatened to swallow the graceless. And Washen's body was accustomed to sleep at this hour, which was why the old grove took her by surprise. Suddenly Locke was standing on the rusty lip of a cliff, waiting for them, gazing down at a narrow valley filled with black-as-night virtue trees.

It was lucky ground. When the world's guts began to pour out on all sides, that slab of crust had fallen into a fissure. The jungle had been burned but never killed. It could be a hundred years old, or older. There was a rich, eternal feel to the place, and perhaps that's why the children had chosen it.

The children. Washen knew better, but despite her best intentions, she couldn't think of them any other way.

"Keep quiet," Locke whispered, not looking back at them. "Please."

In the living shadows, the air turned slightly cooler and uncomfortably damp. Blankets of rotting canopy left the ground watery-soft. A giant daggerwing roared past, intent on some vital business, and Washen watched it vanish into the gloom, then reappear, tiny with the distance, its bluish carapace shining in a patch of sudden skylight.

Locke turned abruptly, silently.

A single finger lay against his lips. But what Washen noticed was his expression, the pain and worry so intense that she had to try and reassure him with a touch.

It was Diu who had wormed the secret out him.

The children were meeting in the jungle, and they'd been meeting for more than twenty years. At irregular intervals, Till would call them to some secluded location, and it was Till who was in charge of everything said and done. "What's said?" Washen had asked. "And what do you do?" But Locke refused to explain it, shaking his head and adding that he was breaking his oldest promise by telling any of it.

"Then why do it?" Washen pressed.

"Because," her son replied. "You have every right to hear what he's saying. So you can decide for yourselves."

Washen stood out of sight, staring at the largest virtue tree she had ever seen. Age had killed it, and rot had brought it down, splitting the canopy open as it crumbled. Adult children and their little brothers and sisters had assembled in that pool of skylight, standing in clumps and pairs, talking quietly. Till paced back and forth on the wide black trunk. He looked fully adult, ageless and decidedly unexceptional, wearing a simple breechcloth and nimble boots, his plain face showing a timid, self-conscious expression that gave Washen a strange little moment of hope.

Maybe Till's meetings were a just an old game that grew up into a social gathering.

Maybe.

Without a word or backward glance, Locke walked into the clearing, joining the oldest children up in the front.

His parents obeyed their promise, kneeling in the jungle.

A few more children filtered into view. Then with some invisible signal, the worshippers fell silent.

With a quiet voice, Till asked, "What do we want?"

"What's best for the ship," the children answered. "Always."

"How long is always?"

"Longer than we can count."

"And how far is always?"

"To the endless ends."

"Yet we live — "

"For a moment!" they cried. "If that long!"

The words were absurd, and chilling. What should have sounded silly to Washen wasn't, the prayer acquiring a muscular credibility when hundreds were speaking in one voice, with a practiced surety.

"What is best for the ship," Till repeated.

Except he was asking a question. His plain face was filled with curiosity, a genuine longing.

Quietly, he asked his audience, "Do you know the answer?"

In a muddled shout, the children said, "No."

"I don't either," their leader promised. "But when I'm awake, I'm searching. And when I'm sleeping, my dreams do the same."

There was a brief pause, then an urgent voice cried out, "We have newcomers!"

"Bring them up."

They were seven year olds — a twin brother and sister — and they climbed the trunk as if terrified. But Till offered his hands, and with a crisp surety, he told each to breathe deeply, then asked them, "What do you know about the ship?"

The little girl glanced at the sky, saying, "It's where we came from."

Laughter broke out in the audience, then evaporated.

Her brother corrected her. "The captains came from there. Not us." Then he added, "But we're going to help them get back there. Soon."

There was a cold, prolonged pause.

Till allowed himself a patient smile, patting both of their heads. Then he looked out at his followers, asking, "Is he right?"

"No," they roared.

The siblings winced and tried to vanish.

Till knelt between them, and with a steady voice said, "The captains are just the captains. But you and I and all of us here ... we are the Builders."

Washen hadn't heard that nonsense in a quarter of a century, and hearing it now, she couldn't decide whether to laugh or explode in rage.

"We're the Builders reborn," Till repeated. Then he gave them the seeds of rebellion, adding, "And whatever our purpose, it is not to help these silly captains."

MIOCENE REFUSED TO BELIEVE ANY of it. "First of all," she told Washen, and herself, "I know my own child. What you're describing is ridiculous. Second of all, this rally of theirs would involve nearly half of our children — "

Diu interrupted. "Most of them are adults with their own homes." Then he added, "Madam."

"I checked," said Washen. "Several dozen of the younger children did slip out of the nurseries — "

"I'm not claiming that they didn't go somewhere." Then with a haughty expression, she asked, "Will the two of you listen to me? For a moment, please?"

"Go on, madam," said Diu.

"I know what's reasonable. I know how my son was raised and I know his character, and unless you can offer me some motivation for this ... this shit ... then I think we'll just pretend that nothing's been said here ... "

"Motivation," Washen repeated. "Tell me what's mine."

With a chill delight, Miocene said, "Greed."

"Why?"

"Believe me, I understand." The dark eyes narrowed, silver glints in their corners. "If my son is insane, then yours stands to gain. Status, at least. Then eventually, power."

Washen glanced at Diu.

They hadn't mentioned Locke's role as the informant, and they would keep it secret as long as possible — for a tangle of reasons, most of them selfish.

"Ask Till about the Builders," she insisted.

"I won't."

"Why not?"

The woman took a moment, vainly picking spore cases from her new handmade uniform. Then with a cutting logic, she said, "If it's a lie, he'll say it's a lie. If it's true and he lies, then it'll sound like the truth."

"But if he admits it — ?"

"Then Till wants me to know. And you're simply a messenger." She gave them a knowing stare, then looked off into the distance. "That's not a revelation I want delivered at his convenience."

THREE SHIP-DAYS LATER, WHILE THE ENCAMPment slept, a great fist lifted the world several meters, then grew bored and flung it down again.

Captains and children stumbled into the open. The sky was already choked with golden balloons and billions of flying insects. In twelve hours, perhaps less, the entire region would blister and explode, and die. Like a drunken woman, Washen ran through the aftershocks, reaching a tidy home and shouting, "Locke," into its empty rooms. Where was her son? She moved along the round, finding all of the childrens' houses empty. A tall figure stepped out of Till's tiny house and asked, "Have you see mine?"

Washen shook her head. "Have you seen mine?"

Miocene said, "No," and sighed. Then she strode past Washen, shouting, "Do you know where I can find him?"

Diu was standing in the center of the round. Waiting.

"If you help me," the Submaster promised, "you'll help your own son."

With a little nod, Diu agreed.

Miocene and a dozen captains ran into the jungle. Left behind, Washen forced herself to concentrate, packing her household's essentials and helping the other worried parents. When they were finished, hours had passed. The quakes had shattered the crust beneath them, and the golden balloons had vanished, replaced with clouds of iron dust and the stink of burning jungle. The captains and remaining children stood in the main round, ready to flee. But the ranking Submaster wouldn't give the order. "Another minute," he kept telling everyone, including himself. Then he would carefully hide his timepiece in his uniform's pocket, fighting the urge to watch the turning of its hands.

When Till suddenly stepped into the open, grinning at them, Washen felt a giddy, incoherent relief.

Relief collapsed into shock, then terror.

The young man's chest cavity had been opened up with a knife, the first wound partially healed but the second wound deeper, lying perpendicular to the first. Ripped, desiccated flesh tried desperately to knit itself back together. Till wasn't in mortal danger, but he wore his agony well. With an artful moan, he stumbled, then righted himself for a slippery instant. Then he fell sideways, slamming against the bare iron in the same instant that Miocene slowly, slowly stepped into view.

She was unhurt, and she was thoroughly, hopelessly trapped.

Spellbound, Washen watched the Submaster kneel beside her boy, gripping his straight brown hair with one hand while she stared into his eyes.

What did Till say to her in the jungle? How did he steer his mother into this murderous rage? Because that's what he must have done. As events played out, Washen realized that everything was part of an elaborate plan. That's why Locke took them to the meeting, and why he had felt guilty. When he said, "I know. I promised," he meant the promise he made to Till.

Miocene kept staring into her son's eyes.

Perhaps she was hunting for forgiveness, or better, for some hint of doubt. Or perhaps she was simply giving him a moment to contemplate her own gaze, relentless and cold. Then with both hands, she picked up a good-sized wedge of nickel-iron — the quakes had left the round littered with them — and with a calm fury, she rolled him over and shattered the vertebrae in his neck, then continued beating him, blood and shredded flesh flying, his head nearly cut free of his paralyzed body.

Washen and five other captains pulled Miocene off her son.

"Let go of me," she demanded. Then she dropped her weapon and raised her arms, telling everyone in earshot, "If you want to help him, help him. But if you do, you don't belong to our community. That's my decree. According to the powers of my rank, my office, and my mood … !"

Locke had stepped out of the jungle.

He was the first to come to Till's side, but only barely. More than two thirds of the children gathered around the limp figure. A stretcher was found, and their leader was made comfortable. Then with a few possessions and virtually no food, the wayward children began to file away, moving north when the captains were planning to travel south.

Diu stood beside Washen; since when?

"We can't just let them get away," he whispered. "Someone needs to stay with them. To talk to them, and help them … "

She glanced at her lover, then opened her mouth.

"I'll go," she meant to say.

But Diu said, "You shouldn't, no. You'll help them more by staying close to Miocene." He had obviously thought it through, arguing, "You have rank. You have authority here. And besides, Miocene listens to you."

When it suited her, yes.

"I'll keep in contact," Diu promised. "Somehow."

Washen nodded, thinking that all of this would pass in a few years. Perhaps in a few decades, at most.

Diu kissed her, and they hugged, and she found herself looking over his shoulder. Locke was a familiar silhouette standing in the jungle. At that distance, through those shadows, she couldn't tell if her son was facing her or if she was looking at his back. Either way, she smiled and mouthed the words, "Be good." Then she took a deep breath and told Diu, "Be careful." And she turned away, refusing to watch either of her men vanish into the shadows and gathering smoke.

Miocene stood alone, speaking with a thin dry weepy voice.

"We're getting closer," she declared, lifting her arms overhead.

Closer?

Then she rose up on her toes, reaching higher, and with a low, pained laugh, she said, "Not close enough. Not yet."

MISSION YEARS 511.01-1603.73

A DOZEN OF THE LOYAL GRANDCHILDREN DISCOVERED the first artifact. Against every rule, they were playing beside a river of liquid iron, and suddenly a mysterious hyperfiber sphere drifted past. With their youngster's courage, they fished it out and cooled it down and brought it back to the encampment. Then for the next hundred years, the sphere lay in storage, under lock and key. But once the captains had reinvented the means, they split the hyperfiber, and inside it was an information vault nearly as old as the earth.

The device was declared authentic, and useless, its memories erased to gray by the simple crush of time.

There were attempts at secrecy, but the Waywards always had their spies. One night, without warning, Locke and his father strolled into the main round. Dressed in breechcloth and little else, they found Washen's door, knocked until she screamed, "Enter," then stepped inside, Diu offering a wry grin as Locke made the unexpected proposal:

Tons of dried and sweetened meat in exchange for that empty vault.

Washen didn't have the authority. Four Submasters were pulled out of three beds, and at Miocene's insistence, they grudgingly agreed to the Waywards' terms.

But the negotiations weren't finished. Diu suddenly handed his ex-commanders wafers of pure sulfur, very rare and essential to the captains' fledgling industries. Then with a wink, he asked, "What would you give us in return for tons more?"

Everything, thought Washen.

Diu settled for a laser. As he made sure it had enough punch to penetrate hyperfiber, nervous voices asked how the Waywards would use it. "It's obvious," Diu replied, with easy scorn. "If your little group finds one artifact, by accident, how many more do you think that the Waywards could be sitting on?"

Afterwards, once or twice every century, the captains discovered new vaults. Most were dead and sold quickly to the Waywards for meat and sulfur. But it was ninth vault that still functioned, its ancient machinery full of images and data, and answers.

The elegant device was riding in Miocene's lap. She touched it lightly, lovingly, then confessed, "I feel nervous. Nervous, but exceptionally confident."

The Submaster never usually discussed her moods.

"With a little luck," she continued, "this treasure will heal these old rifts between them and us."

"With luck," Washen echoed, thinking it would take more than a little.

They arrived at the clearing at three in the morning, shiptime. Moments later, several thousand Waywards stepped from the jungle at the same moment, dressed in tool belts and little else, the men often carrying toddlers and their women pregnant, every face feral and self-assured, almost every expression utterly joyous.

Washen climbed out of the walker, and Miocene handed down the vault.

To the eye, it wasn't an impressive machine — a rounded lump of gray ceramics infused with smooth blue-white diamonds. Yet most of the Waywards stared at the prize. Till was the lone exception. Coming down the open slope, walking slowly, he watched Miocene, wariness mixed with other, less legible emotions.

Locke was following the Waywards' leader at a respectful distance. "How are you, mother?" he called out. Always polite; never warm.

"Well enough," Washen allowed. "And you?"

His answer was an odd, tentative smile.

Where was Diu? Washen gazed at the crowd, assuming that he was somewhere close, hidden by the crush of bodies.

"May I examine the device?" asked Till.

Miocene took the vault from Washen so that she could hand it to her son. And Till covered the largest diamonds with his fingertips, blocking out the light, causing the machine to slowly, slowly awaken.

The clearing was a natural amphitheater, black iron rising on all sides. Washen couldn't count all the Waywards streaming out of the jungle above. Thousands had become tens of thousands. Some of them were her grandchildren and great grandchildren. Diu would know which ones, perhaps. How many of her descendants lived with the Waywards? In the past, during their very occasional meetings, Diu had confided that the Waywards probably numbered in the millions — a distinct possibility since they'd inherited their parents' immortal genes, and since Till seemed to relish fecundity. In principle, this entire audience could be related to Washen. Not bad, she thought. Particularly for an old woman who for many fine reasons had only that one child of her own.

The vault began to hum softly, and Locke lifted an arm, shouting, "Now."

Suddenly the audience was silent, everyone motionless, a palpable anticipation hanging in the hot dry air.

The sky grew dark, and the clearing vanished.

Marrow swelled, nearly filling the chamber. Barren and smooth, it was covered in a worldwide ocean of bubbling, irradiated iron that lay just beneath the hyperfiber ceiling, and the audience stood on that ocean, unwarmed, watching an ancient drama play itself out.

Without sound or any warning, the Bleak appeared, squirming their way through the chamber's wall, through the countless access tunnels — insect-like cyborgs, enormous and cold and swift.

Like a swarm of wasps, they flowed toward Marrow, launching gobs of antimatter that slammed into the molten surface, scorching white-hot explosions rising up and up. The liquid iron swirled and lifted, then collapsed again. In the harsh light, Washen glanced at her son, trying to measure his face, his mood. He looked spellbound, eyes wide and his mouth ajar, his body shivering with an apocalyptic fever. Every face seemed to be seeing this for the first time. Washen remembered the last time she spoke to Diu, almost a decade ago. She asked about the vaults and the Waywards' beliefs, explaining that Miocene was pressing for details. In response, Diu growled, reminding her, "I'm their only non-believer, and they don't tell me much. I'm tolerated for my technical expertise, and just as important, because I long ago stopped kowtowing to Miocene and all the rest of you."

A hyperfiber dome suddenly burst from the iron, lasers firing, a dozen of the Bleak killed before the dome pulled itself under again.

The Bleak brought reinforcements, then struck again.

Hyperfiber missiles carried the antimatter deep into the iron. Marrow shook and twisted, then belched gas and fire. Perhaps the Bleak managed to kill the last of the Builders. Perhaps. Either way, the Builders' revenge was in place. Was waiting. In the middle of the attack, with the Bleak's forces pressing hard, the buttressing fields came on, bringing their blue-white glow. Suddenly the Bleak appeared tiny and frail. Then, before they could flee, the lightning storm swept across the sky, dissolving every wisp of matter into a plasma, creating a superheated mist that would persist for millions of years, cooling as Marrow cooled, gradually collecting on the warm, newborn crust.

Gradually, the Bleak's own carbon and hydrogen and oxygen became Marrow's atmosphere and its rivers, and those same precious elements slowly gathered themselves into butter bugs and virtue trees, then into the wide-eyed children standing in that clearing, weeping as they stared at the radiant sky.

The present reemerged gradually, almost reluctantly.

"There's much more," Miocene promised, her voice urgent. Motherly. "Other records show how the ship was attacked. How the Builders retreated to Marrow. This is where they made their last stand, whoever they were." She waited for a long moment, watching her son's unreadable face. Then with a genuine disappointment, she warned, "The Builders never show themselves. We understand a lot more now, but we're still not sure how they looked."

Till wasn't awestruck by what he had just witnessed. If anything, he was mildly pleased, grinning as if amused, but definitely not excited or surprised, or even particularly interested with what Miocene had to say.

"Listen to me," she snapped, unable to contain herself any longer. "Do you understand what this means? The Event that trapped us here is some kind of ancient weapon designed to kill the Bleak. And everything else on board the ship ... perhaps ... "

"Who's trapped?" Till replied with a smooth, unnerving calm. "I'm not. No believer is. This is exactly where we belong."

Only Miocene's eyes betrayed her anger.

Till continued with his explanation, saying, "You're here because the Builders called to you. They lured you here because they needed someone to give birth to us."

"That's insane," the Submaster snarled.

Washen was squinting, searching for Diu. She recognized his face

and his nervous energy, but only in the children. Where was he? Suddenly it occurred to her that he hadn't been invited, or even worse —

"I know why you believe this nonsense." Miocene said the words, then took a long step toward Till, empty hands lifting into the air. "It's obvious. When you were a boy, you found one of these vaults. Didn't you? It showed you the war and the Bleak, and that's when you began all of this ... this nonsense about being the Builders reborn ... !"

Her son regarded her with an amused contempt.

"You made a mistake," said Miocene, her voice shrill. Accusing. "You were a child, and you didn't understand what you were seeing, and ever since we've had to pay for your ignorance. Don't you see ... ?"

Her son was smiling, incapable of doubt.

Looking at the Waywards, Miocene screamed, "Who understands me?"

Silence.

"I didn't find any vault," Till claimed. "I was alone in the jungle, and a Builder's spirit appeared to me. He told me about the Ship and the Bleak. He showed me all of this. Then he made me a promise: As this day ends, in the coming twilight, I'll learn my destiny ... "

His voice trailed away into silence.

Locke kneeled and picked up the vault. Then he looked at Washen, saying matter-of-factly, "The usual payment. That's what we're offering."

Miocene roared.

"What do you mean? This is the best artifact yet!"

No one responded, gazing at her as if she was insane.

"It functions. It remembers." The Submaster was flinging her arms into the air, telling them, "The other vaults were empty, or nearly so — "

"Exactly," said Till.

Then, as if it was beneath their leader to explain the obvious, Locke gave the two of them a look of pity, telling them, "Those vaults are empty because what they were holding is elsewhere now. Elsewhere."

Till and Locke touched their scalps.

Every follower did the same, fifty thousand arms lifting, a great ripple reaching the top of the amphitheater as everyone pointed at their minds. At their reborn souls.

Locke was staring at his mother.

A premonition made her mouth dry. "Why isn't Diu here?"

"Because he's dead," her son replied, an old sadness passing through his face. "I'm sorry. It happened eight years ago, during a powerful eruption."

Washen couldn't speak, or move.

"Are you all right, Mother?"

She took a breath, then lied. "Yes. I'm fine."

Then she saw the most astonishing sight yet in this long and astonishing day: Miocene had dropped to her knees, and with a pleading voice, she was begging for Till's forgiveness. "I never should have struck you," she said. She said, "Darling," with genuine anguish. Then as a last resort, she told him, "And I do love the ship. As much as you do, you ungrateful shit ... !"

MISSION YEAR 4895.33

FROM THE VERY TOP OF THE NEW BRIDGE, where the atmosphere was barely a sloppy vacuum, Marrow finally began to resemble a far away place.

The captains appreciated the view.

Whenever Washen was on duty, she gazed down at the city-like encampments and sprawling farms, the dormant volcanoes and surviving patches of jungle, feeling a delicious sense of detachment from it all. A soft gray twilight held sway. The buttresses had continued to shrivel and weaken over the last millennia, and if Miocene's model proved true, in another two centuries the buttresses would vanish entirely. For a few moments, or perhaps a few years, there would be no barrier between them and the ship. Marrow world would be immersed in a perfect blackness. Then the buttresses would reignite suddenly, perhaps accompanied by another Event. But by then the captains and their families, moving with a swift, drilled precision, would have escaped, climbing up this wondrously makeshift bridge, reaching the old base camp, then hopefully, returning to the ship, at last.

What they would find there, no one knew.

Or in a polite company, discussed.

In the last five thousand years, every remote possibility had been suggested, debated in depth, and finally, mercifully, buried in an unmarked grave.

Whatever was, was.

That was the mandatory attitude, and it had been for centuries now.

All that mattered was the bridge. The surviving captains — almost two-thirds of the original complement — lived for its completion. Hundreds of thousands of their descendants worked in distant mines or trucked the ore to the factories. Another half million were manufacturing superstrong alloys and crude flavors of hyperfiber, some of each added to the bridge's foundation, while the rest were spun together into hollow tubes. Washen's duty was to oversee the slow, rigorous hoisting of each new tube, then its final attachment. Compared to the original bridge, their contraption was inelegant and preposterously fat. Yet she felt a genuine pride all the same, knowing the sacrifices that went into its construction, and the enormous amounts of time, and when they didn't have any other choice, a lot of desperate, ad hoc inventiveness.

"Madam Washen?" said a familiar voice. "Excuse me, madam."

The captain blinked, then turned.

Her newest assistant stood in the doorway. An intense, self-assured man of no particular age, he was obviously puzzled — a rare expression — and with a mixture of curiosity and confusion, he announced, "Our shift is over."

"In fifty minutes," Washen replied, knowing the exact time for herself.

"No, madam." Nervous hands pressed at the crisp fabric of his technician's uniform. "I just heard. We're to leave immediately, using every tube but the Primary."

She looked at the displays on her control boards. "I don't see any orders."

"I know — "

"Is this another drill?" If the reinforced crust under them ever began to subside, they might have only minutes to evacuate. "Because if it is, we need a better system than having you walking about, tapping people's shoulders."

"No, madam. It's not a drill."

"Then what — ?"

"Miocene," he blurted. "She contacted me directly. Following her instructions, I've already dismissed the others, and now I am to tell you to wait here. She is on her way." As proof, he gave the order's file code. Then with a barely restrained frustration, he added, "This is very mysterious. Everyone agrees. But the Submaster is such a secretive person, so I am assuming — "

"Who's with her?" Washen interrupted.

"I don't think anyone."

But the primary tube was the largest. Twenty captains could ride inside one of its cars, never brushing elbows with one another.

"Her car seems to have an extra thick hull," the assistant explained, "plus some embellishments that I can't quite decipher."

"What sorts of embellishments?"

He glanced at the time, pretending he was anxious to leave. But he was also proud of his cleverness, just as Washen guessed he would

be. Cameras inside the tube let them observe the car. Its mass could be determined by the energy required to lift it. He pointed to the pipe-like devices wrapped around its hull, making the car look like someone's ball of rope, and with a sudden dose of humility, he admitted, "I don't seem to quite understand that apparatus."

In other words, "Please explain it to me, madam."

But Washen didn't explain anything. Looking at her assistant — one of the most talented and loyal of the captains' offspring; a man who had proved himself on every occasion — she shrugged her shoulders, then lied.

She said, "I don't understand it, either."

Then before she took another breath, she suggested, "You should probably do what she wants. Leave. If Miocene finds you waiting here, she'll kick you down the shaft herself."

THE SUBMASTER HAD EXACTLY THE SAME FACE and figure that she had carried for millennia, but in the eyes and in the corners of her voice, she was changed. Transformed, almost. On those rare occasions when they met face to face, Washen marveled at all the ways life on Marrow had changed Miocene. And then she would wonder if it was the same for her — if old friends looked at Washen and thought to themselves, "She looks tired, and sad, and maybe a little profound."

They saw each other infrequently, but despite rank and Miocene's attitudes, it was difficult to remain formal. Washen whispered, "Madam," and then added, "Are you crazy? Do you really think it'll work?"

The face smiled, not a hint of joy in it. "According to my models, probably. With an initial velocity of five hundred meters per —"

"Accuracy isn't your problem," Washen told her. "And if you can slip inside your target — that three kilometer remnant of the old bridge, right? — you'll have enough time to brake your momentum."

"But my mind will have died. Is that what you intend to say?"

"Even as thin and weak as the buttresses are now ... I would hope you're dead. Otherwise you'll have suffered an incredible amount of brain damage." Washen shook her head. "Unless you've accomplished a miracle, and that car will protect you for every millisecond of the way."

Miocene nodded. "It's taken some twenty-one hundred years, and some considerable secrecy on my part..but the results have been well worth it."

In the remote past — Washen couldn't remember when exactly — the captains toyed with exactly this kind of apparatus. But it was the Submaster who ordered them not to pursue it. "Too risky," was her verdict. Her lie. "Too many technical hurdles."

For lack of better, Washen smiled grimly and told her, "Good luck then."

Miocene shook her head, her eyes gaining an ominous light. "Good luck to both of us, you mean. The cabin's large enough for two."

"But why me?"

"Because I respect you," she reported. "And if I order to accompany me, you will. And frankly, I need you. You're more gifted than me when it comes to talking to people. The captains and our halfway loyal descendants ... well, let's just say they share my respect for you, and that could be an enormous advantage."

Washen guessed the reason, but she still asked, "Why?"

"I intend to explore the ship. And if the worst has happened — if it's empty and dead — then you're the best person, I believe, to bring home that terrible news ... "

JUST LIKE THAT, THEY ESCAPED FROM MARROW.

Miocene's car was cramped and primitive, and the swift journey brought little hallucinations and a wrenching nausea. But they survived with their sanity. Diving into the remains of the first bridge, the Submaster brought them to a bruising halt inside the assembly station, slipping into the first empty berth, then she took a moment to smooth her crude, homespun uniform with a trembling long hand.

Base camp had been without power for nearly five millennia. The Event had crippled every reactor, every drone. Without food or water, the abandoned lab animals had dropped into comas, and as their immortal flesh lost moisture, they mummified itself. Washen picked up one of the mandrill baboons — an enormous male weighing little more than a breath — and she felt its leathery heart beat, just once, just to tell her, "I waited for you."

She set it down, and left quietly.

Miocene was standing on the viewing platform, gazing expectantly at the horizon. Even at this altitude, they could only see the captains' realm. The nearest of the Wayward cities — spartan places with cold and simple iron buildings fitted together like blocks — were hundreds of kilometers removed from them. Which might as well have been hundreds of light years, as much as the two cultures interacted anymore.

"You look as if you're expecting someone," Washen observed.

The Submaster said nothing.

"The Waywards are going to find out that we're here, madam. If Till doesn't already know, it's only because he's got too many spies, and all of them are talking at once."

Miocene nodded absently, taking a deep breath.

Then she turned, and never mentioning the Waywards, she said, "We've wasted enough time. Let's go see what's upstairs."

The long access tunnel to the ship was intact.

Tube-cars remained in their berths, untouched by humans and apparently shielded from the Event by the surrounding hyperfiber. Their engines were charged, every system locked in a diagnostic mode. The com-links refused to work, perhaps because there was no one to maintain the dead ship's net. But by dredging the proper commands from memory, Washen got them underway, and every so often she would glance at Miocene, measuring the woman's stern profile, wondering which of them was more scared of what they would find.

The tunnel turned into an abandoned fuel line that spilled out into the leech habitat.

Everything was exactly as Washen's team had left it. Empty and dusty and relentlessly gray, the habitat welcomed them with a perfect silence.

Miocene gripped her belly, as if in pain.

Washen tried to link up with the ship's net, but every connection to the populated areas had been severed.

"We're going on," Miocene announced. "Now."

They pressed on, climbing out of the mammoth fuel tank and into the first of the inhabited quarters. Suddenly they were inside a wide, flattened tunnel, enormous and empty, and looking out at the emptiness, Miocene said, "Perhaps the passengers and crew ... perhaps they were able to evacuate the ship ... do you suppose ... ?"

Washen began to say, "Maybe."

From behind, with a jarring suddenness, an enormous car appeared, bearing down on them until a collision was imminent, then skipping sideways with a crisp, AI precision. Then as the car was passing them, its sole passenger — an enormous whale-like entity cushioned within a salt water bath — winked at them with three of its black eyes, winking just as people did at each other, meaning nothing but the friendliest of greetings.

It was a Yawkleen. Five millennia removed from her post, yet Washen immediately remembered the species' name.

With a flat, disbelieving voice, Miocene said, "No."

But it was true. In the distance, they could just make out a dozen cars, the traffic light, but otherwise perfectly normal. Perfectly banal.

Pausing at the first waystation, they asked its resident AI about the Master's health.

With a smooth cheeriness, it reported, "She is in robust good health. Thank you for inquiring."

"Since when?" the Submaster pressed.

"For the last sixty thousand years, bless her."

Miocene was mute, a scalding rage growing by the instant.

One of the waystation's walls was sprinkled with com-booths. Washen stepped into the nearest booth, saying, "Emergency status. The captains' channel. Please, we need to speak to the Master."

Miocene followed, sealing the door behind them.

A modest office surrounded them, spun out of light and sound. Three captains and countless AIs served as the Master's staff and as buffers. It was the night staff, Washen realized; the clocks on Marrow were wrong by eleven hours. Not too bad after fifty centuries of little mistakes —

The human faces stared at the apparitions, while the AIs simply asked, "What is your business, please?"

"I want to see her!" Miocene thundered.

The captains tried to portray an appropriate composure.

"I'm Miocene! Submaster, First Chair!" The tall woman bent over the nearest captain, saying, "You've got to recognize me. Look at me. Something's very wrong — "

The AIs remembered them, and acted.

The image swirled and stabilized again.

The Master was standing alone in a conference room, watching the arrival of a small starship. She looked exactly as Washen remembered, except that her hair was longer and tied in an intricate bun. Preoccupied in ways that only a Ship's Master can be, she didn't bother to look at her guests. She wasn't paying attention to her AI's warnings. But when she happened to glance at the two captains — both dressed in crude, even laughable imitations of standard ship uniforms — a look of wonder and astonishment swept over that broad face, replaced an instant later with a piercing fury.

"Where have the two of you been?" the Master cried out.

"Where you sent us!" Miocene snapped. "Marrow!"

"Where ... ?!" the woman spat.

"Marrow," the Submaster repeated. Then, in exasperation, "What sort of game are you playing with us?"

"I didn't send you anywhere ... !"

In a dim, half-born way, Washen began to understand.

Miocene shook her head, asking, "Why keep our mission secret?" Then in the next breath, "Unless all you intended to do was imprison the best of your captains — "

Washen grabbed Miocene by the arm, saying, "Wait. No."

"My best captains? You?" The Master gave a wild, cackling laugh. "My best officers wouldn't vanish without a trace. They wouldn't take elaborate precautions to accomplish god-knows-what, keeping out of sight for how long? And without so much as a whisper from any one of them ... !"

Miocene glanced at Washen with an empty face. "She didn't send us — "

"Someone did," Washen replied.

"Security!" the Master shouted. "Two ghosts are using this link! Track them! Hurry! Please, please!"

Miocene killed the link, giving them time.

The stunned ghosts found themselves standing inside the empty booth, trying to make sense out of pure insanity.

"Who could have fooled us ... ?" asked Washen. Then in her next breath, she realized how easy it would have been: Someone with access and ingenuity sent orders in the Master's name, bringing the captains together in an isolated location. Then the same ingenious soul deceived them with a replica of the Master, sending them rushing down to the ship's core ...

"I could have manipulated all of you," Miocene offered, thinking along the same seductive, extremely paranoid lines. "But I didn't know about Marrow's existence. None of us knew."

But someone had known. Obviously.

"And even if I possessed the knowledge," Miocene continued, "what could I hope to gain?"

An ancient memory surfaced of its own accord. Suddenly Washen saw herself standing before the window in the !eech habitat, looking at the captains' reflections while talking amiably about ambition and its sweet, intoxicating stink.

"We've got to warn the Master," she told Miocene.

"Of what?"

She didn't answer, shouting instructions to the booth, then waiting for a moment before asking, "Are you doing what I said?"

The booth gave no reply.

Washen eyed Miocene, feeling a sudden chill. Then she unsealed the booth's door and gave it a hard shove, stepping warily out into the waystation.

A large woman in robes was calmly and efficiently melting the AI with a powerful laser.

Wearing a proper uniform, saying the expected words, she would be indistinguishable from the Master.

But what surprised the captains even more was the ghost standing nearby. He was wearing civilian clothes and an elaborate disguise, and Washen hadn't seen him for ages. But from the way his flesh quivered on his bones, and the way his gray eyes smiled straight at her, there was no doubt about his name.

"Diu," Washen whispered.

Her ex-lover lifted a kinetic stunner.

Too late and much too slowly, Washen attempted to tackle him.

Then she was somewhere else, and her neck had been broken, and Diu's face was hovering over her, laughing as it spoke, every word incomprehensible.

WASHEN CLOSED HER EYES. Another voice spoke, asking, "How did you find Marrow?"

Miocene's voice?

"It's rather like your mission briefing. There was an impact. Some curious data were gathered. But where the Ship's Master dismissed the idea of a hollow core, I investigated. My money paid for the drones that eventually dug to this place, and I followed them here." There was soft laugh, a reflective pause. Then, "This happened tens of thousands of years ago. Of course. I wasn't a captain in those days. I had plenty of time and the wealth to explore this world, to pick apart its mysteries, and eventually formulate my wonderful plan ... "

Washen opened her eyes again, fighting to focus.

"I've lived on Marrow more than twice as long as you, madam."

Diu was standing in the middle of the viewing platform, his face framed by the remnants of the bridge.

"I know its cycles," he said. "And all its many hazards, too.

Miocene was standing next to Washen, her face taut and tired but the eyes opened wide, missing nothing.

"How do you feel?" she inquired, glancing down at her colleague.

"Awful." Washen sat up, winced briefly, then asked, "How long have we been here?"

"A few minutes," Diu answered. "My associate, the false Master, was carrying both of you. But now it's gone ahead to check on my ship — "

"What ship?"

"That's what I was about to explain." The smile brightened, then he said, "Over the millennia, I've learned how to stockpile equipment in hyperfiber vaults. The vaults drift in the molten iron. In times of need, I can even live inside them. If I wanted to pretend my own death, for instance."

"For the Waywards," Miocene remarked.

"Naturally."

The Submaster pretended to stare at their captor. But she was looking past him, the dark eyes intense and unreadable, but in a subtle

way, almost hopeful.

"What do you want?" asked Miocene.

"Guess," he told them.

Washen took a long breath and tried to stand. Miocene grabbed her by the arms, and they stood together like clumsy dancers, fighting for their balance.

"The ship," Washen managed.

Diu said nothing.

"The ultimate starship, and you want it for yourself." Washen took a few more breaths, testing her neck before she pulled free of Miocene's hands. "This scheme of yours is an elaborate mutiny. That's all it is, isn't it?"

"The Waywards are an army," said Miocene. "An army of religious fanatics being readied for a jihad. My son is the nominal leader. But who feeds him his visions? It's always been you, hasn't it?"

No response.

Washen found the strength to move closer to the railing, looking down, nothing to see but thick clouds of airborne iron kicked up by some fresh eruption.

Miocene took a sudden breath, then exhaled.

Strolling towards them, huge even at a distance, was the false Master. Knowing it was a machine made it look like one. It had a patient stride, even with its thick arms raised overhead, waving wildly.

"What about the Builders?" Miocene blurted.

Diu nearly glanced over his shoulder, then hesitated. "What are you asking?"

"Did they really fight the Bleak?"

Diu enjoyed the suspense, grinning at both of them before he admitted, "How the fuck should I know?"

"The artifacts — ?" Miocene began.

"Six thousand years old," he boasted. "Built by an alien passenger who thought I was in the entertainment industry."

"Why pretend to die?" Miocene asked.

"For the freedom it gave me." There was a boy in his grin. "Being dead, I can see more. Being dead, I can disguise myself. I walk where I want. I make babies with a thousand different women, including some in the captains' realm."

There was silence.

Then for a moment, they could just begin to hear the machine's voice — a deep sound rattling between the dormitories, fading until it was a senseless murmur.

"We spoke to the Master," Washen blurted.

Miocene took the cue, adding, "She knows. We told her everything — "

"No, you told her almost nothing," Diu snapped.

"Are you certain?"

"Absolutely."

"But she'll be hunting for us," Washen said.

"She's been on that same hunt for five thousand years," he reminded them. "And even if she sniffs out the access tunnel this time, I won't care. Because on the way back down, I mined the tunnel. Patient one kilo charges of antimatter are ready to close things up tight. Excavating a new tunnel is going to take millennia, and probably much longer. Giving myself and my friends plenty of time to prepare."

"What if no one digs us out?" Washen asked.

Diu shrugged, grinning at her. "How does the old story play? It's better to rule in one realm than serve in another — ?"

Then he hesitated, hearing a distant voice.

The Master's voice.

A laser appeared in his right hand, and he turned, squinting at his machine, puzzled by the frantic arm-waving.

"Another car," said the voice, diluted to a whisper. "It's in the berth next to yours ... !"

"What car?" Diu muttered to himself.

"I believe I know," Miocene replied, eyes darting side to side. "I built two vessels, identical in every way. Including the fact that you never knew they existed."

Diu didn't seem to hear her.

Miocene took a step toward him, adding, "It's obvious, isn't it? Someone else is here. Or if they squeezed in together, two someones."

"So?" Diu replied. "A couple more captains lurking nearby — "

"Except," Miocene interrupted, "I didn't send my invitation to my captains."

Diu didn't ask to whom it was sent.

Washen remembered had Miocene stood on this platform, watching Marrow. Watching for Till, she realized. How long would it have taken him to move the car to the bridge? That was the only question. She had no doubts that once motivated, the Waywards could do whatever they wanted inside the captains' realm.

"I was hopeful," Miocene confessed. "I was hopeful that my son would be curious, that he would follow me back to the ship and see it for himself."

There was a sound, sharp and familiar.

The false Master stopped in mid-stride, then began to collapse in on itself. Then a thin column of light appeared in the smoke, betraying the laser's source.

Diu started to run.

Miocene followed, and Washen chased both of them.

Beside the platform, in easy earshot, stood a drone. A lone figure was kneeling beneath its ceramic body, wearing breechcloth and holding a crude laser drill against his shoulder, intent on reducing the machine to ash and gas.

Diu saw him, stopped and aimed.

At Locke.

Maybe he was hesitating, realizing it was his son. Or more likely, he simply was asking himself: Where's Till? Either way, he didn't fire. Instead, Diu started to turn, looking at his surroundings as if for the first time —

There was a clean hard crack.

A fat chunk of lead knocked Diu off his feet, opening his chest before it tore through his backside.

With the smooth grace of an athlete, Till climbed out from the meshwork beneath the platform. He seemed unhurried, empty of emotion. Strolling past Washen, he didn't give her the tiniest glance. It was like watching a soulless machine, right up until the moment when Miocene tried to block his way, saying, "Son," with a weak, sorrowful voice.

He shoved her aside, then ran toward Diu. Screaming. At the top of his lungs, screaming, "It's all been a lie — !"

Diu lifted his hand, reaching into a bloody pocket.

Moments later, the base camp began to shake violently. Dozens of mines were exploding simultaneously. But the enormous mass of the ship absorbed the blows, then counterattacked, pushing the access tunnel shut for its entire length, and as an afterthought, knocking everyone off their feet.

Diu grabbed his laser.

He managed to sit up.

Washen fought her way to her feet, but too late. She could only watch as Miocene managed to leap, grabbing Till by the head and halfway covering him as the killing blast struck her temple, and in half an instant, boiled away her brain.

Till rolled, using the body as a shield, discharging his weapon until it was empty. Then a burst of light struck him in the shoulder, removing his right arm and part of his chest even as it cauterized the enormous wound.

Using his drill, Locke quickly sliced his father into slivers, then burned him to dust.

Miocene lay dead at Washen's feet, and Till was beside her, oblivious to everything. There was a wasted quality to the face, a mark that went beyond any physical injury. "It's been a lie," he kept saying, without sound. "Everything. A monstrous lie."

Locke came to him, not to Washen, asking, "What is monstrous, Your Excellence?"

Till gazed up at him. With a careful voice, he said, "Noth-

ing." Then after a long pause, he added, "We have to return home. Now."

"Of course. Yes, Your Excellence."

"But first," he said, "the ship must be protected from its foes!"

Locke knew exactly what was being asked of him. "I don't see why — ?"

"The ship is in danger!" the prophet cried out. "I say it, which makes it so. Now prove your devotion, Wayward!"

Locke turned, looking at his mother with a weary, trapped expression.

Washen struck him on the jaw, hard and sudden.

She had covered almost a hundred meters before the laser drill bit into her calf, making her stumble. But she forced herself to keep running, slipping behind the drone with only two more burns cut deep into her back.

It was as if Locke was trying to miss.

Hours later, watching from the dormitory, Washen saw her son carrying four of the comatose baboons out into the courtyard, where he piled them up and turned the lasers on them. Then he showed the ashes to Till, satisfying him, and without a backward glance, the two walked slowly in the direction of the bridge.

Washen hid for several days, eating and drinking from the old stores.

When she finally crept into the bridge, she found Diu's sophisticated car cut into pieces, and Miocene's fused to its berth. But what startled her — what made her sick and sad — was Marrow itself. The captains' new bridge had been toppled. Wild fires and explosions were sweeping across the visible globe. A vast, incoherent rage was at work, erasing every trace of the despised captains, and attacking anyone that might pose any threat to a lost prophet.

In that crystalline moment of horror, Washen understood what she had to do. And without a wasted moment, she turned and began to make ready.

MISSION DATE—INCONSEQUENTIAL

AT THE SHIP'S CENTER, A SEAMLESS NIGHT has been born.

The figure moves by memory through the darkness, picking her way across a tangle of conduits and scrap parts. In a few moments, energy milked from hundreds of tube-cars will flow into an enormous projector, and for a fleeting instant or two, the darkness will be repelled. If her ink-and-paper calculations are correct, and if more than a century of singleminded preparation succeeds, a message of forgiveness and rebirth will skate along the chamber's wall, encircling and embracing the world.

But that is just the beginning.

Wearing a pressure suit and two bulky packs, she climbs over the railing and leaps, bracing for the impact.

Boom.

The blister is thick, but she began the hole decades ago. Tools wait in a neat pile. With a minimum of cuts, the hole opens, and a sudden wind blows past her, trying to coax her into joining it, nothing outside but Marrow's high cold stratosphere.

The buttresses have vanished, at least for the moment.

There's no time to waste. She obeys the wind, letting it carry her through the hole and downward in a wild tumbling spiral.

The sky behind her erupts in light.

In the colors of fire and hot iron, it cries out, "A BUILDER IS COMING. SHE COMES TO LEAD YOU OUT OF YOUR MISERY!"

The Builder grabs the cord of her parachute, then begins to scream.

Not out of fear. Not at all.

It's the full-throated, wonderstruck scream of a girl who has forgotten just how very much fun it is to fall. □

MICHAEL WHELAN

Image Size: 19" x 23" *Edition: 550, S/N*

"LANDING"

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Surviving the city streets of tomorrow is almost impossible.
But sometimes, dying can be even harder.

PYRO

Armana's got my metal. He said last night he'd bring it to the arch footing by Caladrina's cafe by midlight today, but I sat there and dozed long past that, until the City blues came by and fanned me off. The bruises hurt with every step I take.

Actually I think Armana's found a guy he likes, and he's spent my thirty thousand on him. Doubleshafter.

After all the pyro I'd sold him, it was good pyro, great braincooker, he knew it, and I'd told him how much I needed the metal. He looked at me with those soft eyes and said, "Tomas, I'd never let you down." I don't double like he does, but, just like one of his fool men and women, I agreed to let him pay later.

I walk down the stone-ceilinged street and rub my left thigh where the buzzbilly hit me, right on top of my pyro tap. The man in blue always knows where to hurt you. Good thing the tap was locked shut, or I'd have bled to death right out of the big leg vein.

Pyro caps in the mouth work fine, but pyro taps in the thigh are better. When I want to do the flaming death I hook a partner and we load our jectors and hump liqui-pyro through our taps, and we die, locked together. Sex on pyro defines everything else.

Pyro is just a trigger. First you have to catch the P-bug. It's a retrovirus, and it grafts some cute exmitters into your nervous system. All the pyro does is kick off

BY DANA PAXSON
Illustrated by Rick Berry

the exmitters when you're doing sex, and they lock you up in a hot shroud of ecstasy, and you burn laughing in the flames, hotter and hotter, until you die. Then you wake up ready to start again.

Everybody down this deep in the City has had the P-bug, even my own mader. But she canned the pyro five years back, stayed clean. She's a hard woman.

"Tomy!" Think of Ma, there she is, and not where I want to see her. She's small and thin like me, and she's in that skintight yellow suit she wears when she's hunting men. I'd think that lean look would scare them, but she's had more partners than I've sold caps of pyro. Better for her than the hard time she did with my vader.

She's coming out of an art shop waving this package at me. "Tomy, look at this. It's a real Burholm." Another stat sculpture — she's got them falling off her shelves.

Whatever a Burholm is. "Yeah, Ma."

She peels off the wrapper. It's a big jagger beetle, the length of my palm, on a chain, gilded in stat, quad mandibles sprouting from its oversize head, wings just barely showing under golden covers, spear proboscis tucked away. "Burholm froze it, at full size, it's one of his best. I told them to add the chain so I could wear it as a necklace." Stat is permanent life-suspension; if the thing could be thawed out it would bite her and run away.

"So you've got a new man, Ma?" That's when she shops.

"Well, almost. I think so. He likes bugs." She smiles so her ice-white teeth show in that little V-face she has, the same face she gave me. Then she squints at me like I'm a bug myself. "You don't look so good. What's the matter? Is that Nadienne causing you trouble again?"

"No, Ma. I didn't get much sleep last night."

She grins, wraps up the beetle, and puts it in her big bag.

"No, look, Ma, it's not Nadienne, it's — "

She grins again. "You don't have to tell me everything, Tomy. I know."

"No, Ma, it was just a party," I lie, because I don't want her to sov that I'm still pumping braincooker.

She gets that smirk I hate. "You can't resist the women, just like your vad. That's trouble." She turns her back, and fumbles out the beetle again. "Here. Put this on me. I can't get the clasp to work."

"Ma, it looks trashy." I fasten the chain.

"Nothing that cost what this did is trashy. It's art."

Art, my butt-hair. If I could, I'd unfreeze the damn thing. I hate stat. But it's a hot sess with everybody now, so I just watch all the small animals get frozen into gold and dangled around necks and tangled in hairdos. The last hot sess was the skinshift viro that let people look like patches of changing color. Best thing on skinshift was, only the heavy users got the cancer.

"Tomy, why do you keep staring up and down the street? Are you looking for someone?"

"No, Ma." I won't tell her, but I'm looking for Armana, the little creeper, to get my metal. If only I hadn't let him off.

"Since you're not interested in talking with your own mader, I'm going up to Caladrina's for dinner. With someone who cares about me."

... and they lock you up in a hot shroud of ecstasy, and you burn laughing in the flames, hotter and hotter, until you die.

I've seen the kind who cares about her. "Thanks, Ma. I'd just as soon stay down here."

I stop in at Zill's, the cheap-food cockpit. I straddle a stool along with all the lurks and the hooks, munch on the burgs this place scorches to a nice dark brown, count the hagflies mating on the stone ceiling, watch the blues out in the understreet drag away parts of dead people. The green-burning pyro smell that's always up my nose keeps away the stink.

My metal's gone, and I owe Rask for the shipment. Her cocks won't like that.

I should have stuck with duct-cleaning.

"Tomas." A light voice in my left ear. Nadienne. So much I missed her, it's been months; I turn, and she's next to me, but there's tall Georg the Cadaver, dangling by her side again. My gut hurts to see him with her. Some lurk with lizard ears and a patchwork face squeezes past me on his way in.

"Watch it, cock," I snap at him. He's gone. I glare at Georg. "So?"

He shrugs. "Ask her."

Nadienne shrugs, but her mouth is set and the words come hard. "You aren't there, Tomas. I've tried, I'd keep trying with you if I thought you'd be around for me. You never are. You're just crazy." Even with that halo of light brown hair, her round face has a look as hard as the mile-deep stone around us.

My gut lances me. "So you just gave up on me, that's right?" I drop the burg on the trencher and wipe my hands on both coverall sleeves. I'd just started to think maybe she'd hang on, give me a chance to get the pieces plugged in.

"Tomas — " Georg starts. Big idiot, all hair and eyes.

"Eat your lip, halfcock." I stand up fast and jab my shiver up under his chin. His eyes bug out; the shiver's vibro edge will split his jaw in half if he moves. Pyro makes me fast.

"Tomas." Now it's Nadienne. "Don't. I made the choice. If you'd just dropped the hose, I'd have — "

"Stuff it, sweets." The hose is my pyro connection. My shiver keeps Georg's chin up. Nadienne loved me, once. "Yeah, you're just another hook to me now. Go bleed with your sisters over there and take Hair Boy with you. He'll sell your pots and pans." I twitch Georg's jaw to the left a bit, then to the right. His eyes water. "Goodbye." I pull the shiver, slap the burger to the stone floor, and head out. Time to find pretty Armana and collect, before Rask finds me.

Back up the screw stair to Caladrina's, at the Aswar Tyrae crossing, lots of steps, yanking myself up along the black steel handrail. I don't like the lifts, because inside one you're a bird in a can. A killer will put a dozen slugs or a high-beam through you while you pass his floor. That's why I limp on a bad left foot, even with all the repair time I spent in the tank.

Nadienne brought me through all that. Damn her and those green-spattered eyes, and that long neck I couldn't stop kissing every time we made love. She'd whisper that poetry to me, that song of Thringe's I could never remember, until I'd sleep. That was the only time I'd ever dream sweet things. And now she's gone.

Shaking my head, I almost run into a pair of bughead gacks, alien gene-transfects, bobbing down the helical steps. I back aside. Shadows above me in their long loose single-suits, they stop, their huge black-facet eyes centered on me. They've got no noses, upper jaws cleft in two, hard gray-brown skins gleaming like dimlit shells.

These things can chop me into burg faster than I can blink. One says to me in a bass voice with screechy edges, "Hello, Little Wire Man." It waves a long-bladed cutter a hair away from my nose. The other one gives a squealing whistle and says, "Rask is not happy with you. She wants her metal." The other one flicks the cutter's tip back

and forth in my face, one two three, and a tiny welling of blood wets the end of my nose.

"I'm on my way to get it right now." I back down a step and the blade follows, a precise hair's distance from my upper lip.

"By midlight tomorrow," the screechy bass says, the tripartite mouth barely moving. The blade flickers, and pain burns under my eyes, spreads through my whole face. "This is interest on the money." The gack opens an armored hand, and I see through red haze two ragged patches of skin off my cheeks.

I live in this huge underground cooker we call the City. A long time ago I got topside, where everything is blue and violet overhead — a sky, my vader said in that rumble of his — and no ceiling and no walls, and I got back down the City stairs as fast as I could. Here the arched streets are cut through bedrock, there's only so many ways something can come at me. I'd rather dodge gacks in the deep City than die on the surface from nothing at all. Even when it hurts this bad.

All the medman can do is poly over the two bloody spots under my cheekbones, while I scream through a rag in my teeth. Thanks to the pyro in me, the anesthetic barely touches it. The medman croons, slaps thinseal on the wounds, and I grip the bedframe so hard my fingerjoints crack. The stone ceiling sweats.

"Here, zagger, some 'down for the next two days," he says and pries my fingers loose and slips me some eiderdown pills. "These'll sop up the pyro in a few hours and cool your face awhile. Nice job the gacks did on your trigems." His hand rests softly on my arm. He's a young guy, and his wet brown eyes say he'd like me to do him, and soon.

I shrug away his hand and sit up. "Thanks, lovely. What's it weigh in metal?" Eiderdown is illegal, and he's taking a big chance handing it to me, trying to buy me.

His face sours, he looks away. "No charge. Just — " He holds a hand out to me, drops it to his side.

"Sorry, meddie, maybe another life. Thanks for the 'down." I pocket the pills and cruise out of the medshop into a darkened understreet to look for Armana, my cheekbones screaming at me. A woman sprints past me — by the Pit, it's Nadienne — and vanishes around a corner. Bodies in black toughcloth crash into me and knock me on my tail.

"Fuckinjag fanass!" An Argaz guy with scarred neck bounces up and tries to jump past me and I come up between his legs and toss him into the wall, and a woman, her neck likewise marked, throws a shoulder into me and slams me at the medshop door.

Now, I'm in the Kai Ren Hau Coll, like Nadienne. The colls are just big extended families, and Kai Ren is real tight. All my coll people are hot with a blade and the limbs Chan gave us, and I don't like casual rudeness from strangers in the street, especially when my face has a migraine. And these two are from Argaz Coll, chasing Nadienne, and that's motivation, even if I'm zagged at her.

The woman is about a step away when I pitch a leg between hers and she flies twisting onto her face, and the guy thinks he's behind me and I spin with a bladed hand and spear his gut, and he doubles in time for me to knee his face on the way down. But she's up at me, dark hair and eyes and that necklace of snaky flesh the Argaz do to their kids, and her blade nearly guts me. She's way too fast.

Her voice rattles, "I'm gonna kill you, little ratface."

I back away; she sinks to her knees, and collapses. The guy raises his head, and slumps again. Nadienne appears over the two of them with a long boxy sleep gun in her hand. "You gave me just enough time," she says.

I squint through the pain's fog. "Nadienne?" My energy is gone. I lean back against the rock wall.

"Tomas, your face. It's the bugs again, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Just metal, like always. What do the Argaz want with you?" The words come, even though I want to tell her to go away.

"I've got some of their bits." She nudges the woman with her toe. Bits. Information. My favorite City poet Thringe, she says it like this:

Information:
Stews, boils the City,
Erupts like lava,
Sets my bitch on fire,
Eats rock like water,
Makes lying from truth
And truth from nothing.
She giggles, notches
My ear with her blade.

and I always forget and skip to the end verse,

Information:
Eat it, Mister Cock;
Eat it and sweat bars
Of sweet platinum,
And scream yourself blind.

It's the one poem my vader didn't beat into me. I say, "Sweat bars of sweet platinum," and point at Nadienne. It's an old game of ours. I hope she'll still play, and why do I hope?

The guy she hit is gone.

"And scream yourself blind, Mister Cock," she says, her eyes still on the woman. "You know the other one, where she writes, 'Trance bleeds me dry, no pyro left for burning?'" She smiles, just the way she used to.

I can't resist her. "Say more of this one, the middle part."

She looks over my shoulder. "Not now. They're here again." Clatter and hum, splatter and come, the Argaz are back, and on the attack.

They're at least four, counting the guy who knocked me over, and moving up a side street to the crossing near us, nice and slow, and they shake their shuriko bangles to let us know we're about to be unpleasantly fucked.

She's got the gun out, and I look up and say, "No, Deenie. This way." Footholds up the wall mark a conduit access in the ceiling of the understreet. My zone, my own.

"But, Tomas — "

I grab her ass and push her toward the wall, and she doesn't wait; she's already up opening the hatch overhead, and I've got my aching face almost up her butt, my legs trembling with exhaustion, when she jumps upward and kicks my head against the rock. Blackness.

A hand grabs my collar and keeps me from falling off the wall, and I weave and grab for the hatch opening and find it, and then my legs come back and I kick and strain and I'm up, and she lets the door down quietly. "Sorry," she whispers, and climbs ahead.

I bite my cheeks inside to drive away the pain, and we climb silently. The jingling and chanting swell and then stop. So do we. The air is thick in here, in the blackness; rat piss perfumes the rungs and the walls, and loose dust chokes me. We wait. Tears leak in on my scraped facial nerves, burning me deeper. I'm afraid they'll leak down through the hatch and point me out to the waiting Argaz cocks.

My vad showed me these tunnels when I was seven, after the streetboys beat me for the sixth day in a row. "Learn them," he'd said through a mouthful of green chaw, "and you'll always have a step ahead of them." So I did. I know all the conduit service tubes from here up to Naga and back, and some that lead down to Babiar where the stink can kill you. It killed my little brother Simeon when he was six and I was eight.

No, it was Rask's cocks who killed him, chasing him off into the tubes just to hear him crying and lost, laughing at him. I'd gone after him and when I figured out where he'd gone and heard his voice so far down, I went down after him and tried not to think about the smell, but I passed out, and when I woke up I couldn't hear him any more and I was choking. He never came back, and our vad beat me for half a day.

No sound for a long time. "Let's keep going," I whisper.

"Where?" she whispers back. Her foot scrapes, feeling for the next toehold.

"It leads up to the next level, where there's a Y. Take the left branch

and you'll come out at a closet. Wait till I'm out." The next level up is where Armana lives. That's where I want to go next.

"So what've you got?" I ask her in the closet, one level up, in the dark. We're about ten strides from the nearest street, side by side and leaning against the stone wall, our shoulders touching. I'm shaking from fatigue.

"It's a ravel. I think it's got Argaz codes in it, but I don't know what they are."

"What's a ravel?"

"It's a memory device. You hear this song, but you can't forget the rhythm patterns in it. It's a whole story, but the accents and the words work together into some kind of code. The receiver can lay it over a second ravel, and pick out the code from the two."

"Like it's masked."

"Yeah."

"Does Georg know?"

"Not any more. He's dead." A deep breath in the dark. "This is mutework." She says the City Security Force phrase just like she uses it every day. What has Nadienne been up to?

This dark place seems too tight and I want to be on the street in the light. "Let's get outside." I move toward the street end of the closet and listen. "Who gave you this code? The Argaz?"

Nadienne doesn't say anything, just breathes behind me. Footsteps pass. I unlatch, pull back the door, and check the street. Not much light, but no one coming. We exit.

"Come on, what's this about?" I turn and face her.

"I found it on a tunechip on a table at Warr's, after Georg and I left you at Zill's. I saw it and jacked it, and it started, and I couldn't stop listening, and when it ended I could do it all from start to finish, not one mistake." She looks surprised, reliving it.

Warr's is a favorite Argaz place: deep greens, cumin smell, glowlit with hard seats. "So how'd you know it was a … "

"Ravel? Georg explained it." She stops and puts her fist to her mouth, shaking her head, green-gray eyes large and limpid. "I went to get a drink and when I came back he was sitting there dead with a threadwire from the ceiling around his neck." Her mouth jitters for a moment, like she wants to cry or talk and can't decide which.

Threadwire: an Argaz stunt. "You still got the chip?"

She feels with two fingers behind her ear, frowning. "No. Whoever killed him must have grabbed it." She shakes again.

"What did the blues say when they showed up?"

"I didn't wait for them."

"Why Georg?"

"I can't say." Mutework. She's been working for the blues, and here I am up to my skull in pyro, enough to send me to the mines forever. And Skinny Georg was sucking on the blues too. So now she comes back to me.

I feel naked, and angry. "Look, I've got to rest. I want to see Armana, and you can come with me and keep out of sight for a bit while I rest up. All right?"

She hesitates, then nods. Wheels are turning, and I know I've got to watch her. But I've got to watch Armana too, so I'll set them up one on the other. "Armana owes me much metal, and I don't entirely trust him. Keep your eyes open." She nods again. That was easy.

I rattle Armana's doorwatch a few times, and he finally opens up and lets us in, greeting us with a fake yawn as we move down the corridor to his cute mainroom with its furry yellow furniture. I take soft-eyed olive-skinned Armana aside in his silky blue robe and tell him to watch out with her and where's my fucking metal you two-way prick? And then I stagger into his little study and fall across the padded divan he keeps there, and the eiderdown starts its lullaby in my brain and that's all for now.

The smell of good roast bird, basted in wine, and the sound of paraviol sonatas wake me, and I'm stark naked and I've slept straight through the dark hours, belly down and belly empty. The bird's a lot better meal than Zill's can serve, and I struggle up and go piss and come out to find the grill fan running and the bird on its platter and a note that says,

We went out. See you at midlight. A. & N.

Isn't that sweet. I stuff most of the bird pieces in my mouth in rapid order and get my bodysuit on while I eat, juicy bird going in and nasty words coming out, and I burrow through Armana's utility space and find his big beamshooter and a feeder full of cartridges, and I'll travel hot. Come midlight, Rask's cocks and gacks will unwind my guts and tie me in them. I've got five hours.

Armana talks his way around everybody. I had to like him, until I found out how much he could make me hate him. I'd ransack his place, but I owe Rask a lot more than I can find here. No. I want Armana to give me the number that will unlock what I owe Rask, plus costs.

I tuck the shooter into my inner thighliner, and it looks like I've been a long time without any. Truth it is. On the way out, I pocket a lovely little crystal globe filled with silver seedfish, and I dropkick the cooked bird's remains at the lace wall hanging.

On the way, who do I see but big Jackie B the Tunnel Plugger coming up toward Armana's from the Tyrae crossing. Jackie B's a huge boy, that's the Tunnel Plugger part, thick and hard like a tree with orange bark, but pyro's got his noose and I've got his pyro. "Jay Bee Tee Pee I want to see," I lie at him.

He grins picket rows of gray teeth at me, and rumbles, "Tomasss. Hey, now, Wire Man, see you tonight at Garnsey's. New steel, need that feel."

"Armana pass today? With Nadienne?"

His big brows get dark and come down like thunder. "Armana? That runtcock? With Nadienne? Aah haa haa." He throws back his head and roars. The tears trickle down his large flat face. "No, Wire Man, so?"

"No, see, he owes me." And here I pull the thigh tight for a second and Jackie B can see the beamer's outline on my leg.

He snickers. "It's a real one. You making it stand up for the little feep?"

"It's his." I let the fabric go. "Code me. If you see him, call me and say there's a lot of dead bugs, and tell me where he is. If Nadienne's with him, tell me the bugs laid eggs. Got to let me know at least an hour before midlight." We do all this code because the blues stick probes everywhere, and filter for the hot stuff off the fiber. That's how I spent a few years in the Transellas mines, waiting for the pharmas from my loving mader every thirty-five days and coughing grayish-yellow slime. My mader tries to keep an eye over me. Mostly I hope she doesn't.

He pinches three fingers together, holds them up.

"Two purple," I say, "and half the third in orange."

Jackie B grins. He's just bought two fine hits of pyro for his efforts, with a dash of 'thellin on top. "Be Garnsey's at halflight. Vapor," he says, and ambles past me humming trance music in that bass of his.

"Garnsey's," I answer, hoping I live that long, and I head for Tyrae, to touch my buddy Essa for a tip on Armana's doings. Essa likes to ride me once in a while, when the mood is on her; she serves at Caladrina's, early in the day, and she sees a lot of people at the crossing there. It's just over four hours before midlight, when Rask's gacks and her cocks collect their metal each day. They're always punctual.

Caladrina's feedspot, with tables and chairs and plants in clusters in a big half-circle out under the snake-sculpted dome of the Aswar Tyrae crossing, is nearly empty. Essa in her tight purple moneymaker bodysuit and puff of silvered hair is bending over a table, setting down a tall glass of blue stuff. I slide over to her and open my mouth, and a voice says,

"Tomas. What a nice gesture, on this special day." I shut my mouth. It's my ma.

She's been to the remaker's. Her cast-iron black hair is *sculpted* into a lot of leaves, like, and she's got on this leather body suit, and the long dark-green nails match her eyes.

Around her neck is that beetle necklace, with the thumb-length beetle still alive in its gold stat coating, suspended forever in midscuttle. She takes a pull on the blue stuff, dabs a bit of froth off her lip, raises one eyebrow and says, "You remembered, didn't you?"

Essa's watching me with this smirk on her face. I start sweating and say, "That's why I'm here, Ma, you know I wouldn't forget," and it's

worse than those two gacks, because she'll hand me more than my face if she sovs I have no frogfaced notion what she's talking about.

She looks up at me with that suspicious squint, and I think, Damn, here it comes, and she says, "Don't tell me you're trying that facial place again. Their grafts never take."

I grin and shrug and just then the two patches of dressing fall off my sweaty smiling cheeks and she can see the nerves and fat cells all sitting out in open air. They're burning me like fire.

"It's ugly. You should go ask for your money back. Doesn't it *hurt*?"

Oh, my, yes it does hurt like someone has just started pulling my face off with a tractor and a red-hot chain, and of course I say, "No, Ma. It's fine."

Essa snickers and walks off, wiggling her ass.

"So what did you bring me on my hundred and first?" Ma holds out her hand.

Birthday. I go numb, and then I remember the little globe I lifted from Armana's with the seedfish swirling in it. "Close your eyes, Ma." I get it out and put it in her palm.

She grabs it and looks, and her eyes get big, and then get small again looking up at me. "You stole this, didn't you?"

"No, Ma, I got it for you. Don't you like it?" Now my nose *and* eyes are running.

"These are worth a lot of money, several hundred pieces for ones half this size. You don't buy these at a store, Tomas." She's got that squinty look again.

"Ma, I swear, I got it at an effects sale some guy tipped me to. Don't make me out like that all the time. I love you." I sniff.

She keeps squinting but she puts out her hand to me. Safe at last. I get down on one knee by her chair, and she puts me in a headlock and I want to scream at the fire in my face, and she says, "All right, Tomy, you're my very own," and she rocks me until I'm afraid I'll bleed on her leather suit and pass out besides. "I love it and I think it's the most wonderful gift you ever gave me. It reminds me of Thringe, the one I used to read you at bedtime about the jewels of trust singing light." I twist free at last to take her hand. Her eyes are glistening.

"Happy Birthday, Ma," I say, and then I pass out from the pain.

I wake up on Caladrina's stone floor, and Ma and Essa are kneeling over me. Ma finishes pouring a pitcher of water on me and Essa has some adhesoplast waiting.

"Just where is that facial place, Tomy? I'm gonna go tell them to refund your money." Ma sets the pitcher carefully on the table and hauls me up to sit in the puddle of water.

Essa smooths the plast into place over my skinless patches. The burning settles down a bit, must have been some 'caine in the plast. She gives me her cool smile, like she thinks I'm interested in her. Well, sometimes I am.

"Thanks, Essa. Have you seen Armana?" I scooch out of the puddle.

"Not today," she mutters, "but — "

"Tomy?" Ma never gives up.

What'll I do? As long as I get her out of here, so Rask won't find her … "I got it done at Ogi's, down the screw about four levels and five streets west," I lie. She never goes down from here, only up, like to where she lives. And Ogi's got burned out a week ago, for selling bad skin to an Argaz guy. The zone down around Ogi's is core grotesque; she'd never —

"I'm going down there right now for you. You just sit right there and I'll be back with your money." She picks up that bag of hers that's big enough for her to hide in, and she slaps a small fistful of coin on the table and marches off, the leather suit squeaking.

"No, Ma, don't," I call out, but when I try to get up, the blood leaves my brain and Essa catches me just before my head hits the table edge.

"She'll be fine," Essa says to me. "They should be scared of her down there. You just sit here and I'll be right back."

The smell of good roast bird, basted in wine, and the sound of paraviol sonatas wake me, and I'm stark naked and I've slept straight through the dark hours, belly down and belly empty.

Marvelous. Now I'm about to get killed, and my mader is about to get killed, and my face is carved up. I'm not in a good mood, so I drop a big jolt of pyro. "Where in the Pit is Armana?" I say to myself, looking around, and I leave my mouth open on the last syllable. Looking in at me between the plants at Caladrina's entrance is Rask.

She's tall and muscled like an ironhumper, pale-pink skin, no hair, and wide frown-angled eyebrows over a long, sharp face. She's got on this skintight watersuit that seems to flow down over her body and limbs. She steps into the doorway like a large cat, and two cocks flank in behind her, same size and build as she is. In her left hand she holds a biojector. It's her favorite toy, Jackie B says, when she's hunting; she loads the bugs into her prey and watches the slow death. She's loaded the bugs, and then put the victim in stat, too. Takes ten years to die, standing paralyzed in gold, while the bugs eat one nerve cell at a time.

She looks unhappy.

"Tomas Shanxi. You're here early, but your metal's long late." Her words come soft and low, but they carry ten strides as if she whispered them in my ear. She's got this amazing voice, sounds like any voice she wants.

"I'm still calling it in," I say in a voice that doesn't want to be a voice. Essa is off to clean tables, out of the way. My pyro hasn't kicked in.

"That's what you said last halflight, little cock." She takes these slow, flowing steps in my direction as she talks, and she starts to raise the one finger that says to her cocks, *Take him*, and my pyro finally plugs in, and I goose my brain out of its hole and do the Kai Ren thing.

Kai Ren training takes a lot of time. It's one school from which I actually graduated, where they keep hitting you until you learn how not to be there when they try to hit you again. The Kai Ren Hau make sure all their families' kids do the full course, and I finished at the top after five years. Being my vader's kid gave me a head start.

So by the time Rask's cocks step out after me, the entire route is all wired into my spine, and I wait and look helpless long enough for them to relax just a bit.

Kai Ren calls it Crossing the Ice: my foot hooks a chair into the left one's knee as I move forward and left, fake a jump over the plant and reverse direction as the right one's bullets go past my throat, and now the left one is my shield against the other two.

I angle a chair seat at the muzzle of his gun, his bullets ricochet off through the crossing, and the chair belts his face, and I coil behind three tall plants as more bullets go bump, bump into the pot soil. My hand inside my coverall leg, I fire Armana's beamer at the sculpted stone ceiling, sizzling my own knee; with a roar a section of rock breaks loose from above, and I sprint zigzag away through a blizzard of fire as the rock thunders down between me and them, throwing up a cloud of stones and dust.

Beamers are not considered civilized down here, but what to do? I exit the crossing, with Caladrina screaming curses at me for the third time this year. Rask and her remaining cock charge out of the cloud, and I'm already in a service closet, busy disappearing.

I'm curled up, sweating and breathing hard, in a water-conduit

access tunnel, two levels down from Tyrae. The hole in my coverall leg smells like scorched hair. I've still got three hours. Three hours to get Ma out of the slum zone, find Armana and get my money, and get Rask her money before she kills me. She'll probably kill me anyway, if my Ma doesn't find me first.

My comm mutters at me. I open up. "Who?"

"Remember the bugs we saw at Obergamm's?" Jackie B. "They laid a lot of eggs."

"Obergamm's?" That numb stupid feeling keeps coming back, no matter what I do. That's our codename for Ogi's. What in the Pit are they doing there?

"Yeah. Eggs, eggs, they're hatching more bugs. The place is crawling with them." Before I can say anything more he's broken off.

That hatching bit wasn't part of the code, but he probably means somebody is there along with Armana and Nadienne. I uncurl and find my way down and out to the screw stair. My lips make ugly silent words.

Ogi's is on a long narrow jinky street called Stang that runs from Grazamar Crossing on a tangent to where it joins Fourth Ring, an understreet that circles the City's long vertical axis. I come out near Grazamar and look around. Before midlight, things are quiet, a few shops are open, the narrow corridors back to living cubbies are mostly still closed. Junked furniture, discarded packing, dead vermin, ruined metal bracework from tunnels, all litter Stang Street on its left side, piled almost to its ceiling arch. I walk to the first jink, where the street angles left a bit and then goes on to where Ogi's used to be, on the right. As I pass the angle, Jackie B steps out.

"My Ma been here?" I ask him.

He laughs and shakes his head. "Your Ma? No, Wire Man, but Nadienne and Squish-Armana are inside Ogi's." He grins those big teeth at me. "With Georg."

Georg? I gape. "Inside? But the place is closed, I was just by there two days ago." And why in the Pit's green slime did Nadienne lie about Georg?

Jackie B. shrugs. "Take a look. See you at Garnsey's."

"No, wait, J.B., back me up on this one for a bit."

"Nyeg," he growls. "I'm tied down." He shows me the monitor anklet with the police insignia on it. One fight and he's in the mines, but for twenty snows, not just three like I did.

I swallow hard. "Garnsey's, then."

"See me after. Vapor, Wireboy." He's gone.

I stare up Stang Street to where Ogi's is. It's dark here — the usual ceiling strip of light is broken and dimmed in many spots — and on the right a darkened yellow sign that says OGI'S in lapscript marks a faintly lit doorway. Blocking much of the street all along the left side slump empty hulks of hardplast freight boxes. No shops, not even a residence access tunnel or a utility closet. Bits of shattered plast litter the street.

It's a shooting range, with places to hide, and I don't like it. I start moving along the right wall to the doorway, which is about fifty strides from the angle. Armana's beamer bumps my thigh, and the muzzle rubs the spot where it burned my knee.

I can't figure Nadienne. She's not the messenger type — she likes to do her sess making meals in that street kitchen up around Naga — so why is she messing with the Argaz? And the police?

About two-thirds of the way to Ogi's door I get that feeling, Jackie B. calls it air-talk, like when this breeze hits your neck hair and says, Pay attention.

I stop and look back. Something hard grates, like heavy fingernails scraping along the stone wall, and a bulbous head appears from past the angle. Rask has sent one of her alien gacks to follow me.

My guts loosen. I start to slide along, flat against the wall, hoping to reach the some cover before they open up, hoping that Rask will want me alive instead of cooked. As I reach the door, I look back, and now two gack heads are looking around the angle at me. They haven't moved.

They could take me in a few seconds. I turn to look for the door handle, and the reason for their lack of movement becomes clear. Ahead of me at the next jink in Stang Street, about twenty strides away facing me and the gacks, is the pair of Argazindari I'd stopped earlier with Nadienne. They glare past me at the gacks. As I stare numbly at them, four more Argaz drift up to join them.

How enemies do accumulate. At least they're waiting, probably going to talk over which way they want me sliced. I can only think of one thing worse, and it happens. Stumping past the Argazindari with her huge bag comes my mader.

I stand there in the street as she comes up to me. No one else moves. Her leather bodysuit is scratched and tattered on one leg.

"You didn't tell me this place was out of business," she said crisply. "I came all the way down here, saw the locked door, started back up, and then these rope-necks wanted to play with me." She tossed her head in the direction of the Argaz. "Life with your father trained me well."

"Ma — " I hiss. Evidently she impressed them.

"Shut up. I went back up to Caladrina's, and you were gone, and the place was a mess. Caladrina insisted I pay for the wreckage. I had to give him that crystal egg you stole, as security."

"Ma — "

"Shut up. Then I found out you'd come back down here again, and that made me very disappointed in you. Very disappointed."

"Yeah. Eggs, eggs, they're hatching more bugs. The place is crawling with them."

Right now I'm real disappointed in Jackie B. He never could keep from spilling to my ma. The Argaz and Rask's gacks are now easing out and coming to join us. "Ma — "

By itself, the door handle turns under my fingers and the door swings inward. A female voice says, "What? Who's there?"

I push the door inward to a long, dimly-lit room filled with tables, chairs and plug-in cyberparty wombs. Nadienne stares right in my face. Behind her stands Armana, and at the rear utility exit is Georg, looking paler and skinnier than usual.

Nadienne says to me, "Shit! What are you doing here?"

I grab my mader by the hand and drag her inside and shut the door. "Never mind. The Argaz are here, and Rask's gacks are here, and they all want me dead, and you besides. And what's Georg doing — "

Ma cuts in. "Tomas, is she a friend of yours? Why don't you introduce me?"

"Ma — "

"Tomas?"

"This is my mader. This is Nadienne, of Song Clan, and this is Armana. That's Georg. He's supposed to be dead." A murmur outside the door. Georg is muttering rapidly into a comm, and he's sweating just like I am. He nods vigorously to Nadienne.

A breath-long pause, and the door opens. Rask's gacks and the Argaz walk in with weapons in hand. "We will kill all of you," the Argaz announce, "for stealing our coll's information."

"But we have a price to take," buzzes one of the gacks, pointing at me. "This little creature owes our employer a large sum of metal, and it must be made to repay."

Ripping a gap in my coverall's leg, they take my beam gun. One of each group covers us, and the others negotiate in the doorway. When they return, Rask has joined them, carrying a wide-snouted beamer.

"We will help you die slowly," she purrs. "Not like *this*." She shoots Georg into a blaze of smoke and shitty steam.

"Argazindari, your information is datavaulted," Nadienne says, her

voice trembling but clear and careful. "Our deaths will release it, publicly." She blinks, and she only does that to stop tears.

The Argaz huddle, call in Rask, debate. I don't see Armana any more. One of the cyberparty wombs that was open earlier is closed.

"The solution is simple," Rask says, turning to us. She points at Ma's beetle necklace. "We'll just stat all of you."

Ma draws me close. "This is my only son. Can't you just let him work off what he owes you?"

Rask frowns with those long brows, then smiles, and finally says, "No."

We're at the stat baths, a large industrial complex run by one of Rask's front companies, set in deep thick-pillared halls low down in the City's darker layers. Nadienne and I stand, drenched in slimy white prep fluid, on a large round steel plate. The gray steel hemisphere of the stat sprayer hulks overhead, ready to freeze us into immobility. Ma looks at me and pats my shoulder. I can't read her face. "Tomy, at least you'll still be alive."

"Yeah, Ma, thanks," I say. I look over at Nadienne.

Rask sees, and the corner of her long mouth turns upward. "Lovers. This inspires me. Arrange yourselves accordingly. No, clothes off first. We'll have some real art here, something with a touch of erotic class." She smiles at my mader. "Would you like to add to your statuary collection, Tamarr?"

My ma says, "It's the best choice I get, isn't it?" He voice is as flat as the stone floor.

"Just kill us both," Nadienne says in this heavy voice.

The Argaz smirk.

Desperate, I look at Ma, and she looks down for a second to hide her face. "No," I start, and Rask slides over to me.

"No? I could just plant the little eaters inside you," and she goes on, getting more elaborately sadistic. No failure of character here. The eaters are the City's garbage disposal protozoa, fast and efficient, and Rask has her own mutant strains. They're slow.

"Tomy, just do as she says," Ma tells me. "I'll manage somehow. At least you won't be dead." She steps back. Her eyes glisten.

Fumbling all the way, I strip, and take the naked Nadienne in my arms.

"Not like that," Rask says, "Hold her thigh with yours."

Nadienne starts shivering, tears running down her face. As the first spray hits the prep slime, and my limbs stiffen, I remember the little sculptures of lovers my mader keeps in her richly upholstered sitting room.

In stat, whole days rattle past you like the buzz of a hagfly, tickling your metallized skin. You can't see or hear. Your body is stone. To get from one thought to the next takes a day, if only you remember what a day was.

Nadienne. I still don't know why she came back to me, why she lied about Georg when she never lies. She could never understand my lying, as if I didn't need to do it.

Now, Essa understands me. She isn't Kai Ren — she's Gellin Coll, which isn't bad, just slower and more social — but she always knows I'm going to lie, and she just gets this impatient look like, get it over with.

This terrible cracking sound jabs me in the spine. I want to move, and I start this real slow thought about the Argaz coming back to torture me, and then the metal skin starts ripping itself from me and I stop thinking and scream.

It's just like when the gacks peeled bits of my face off, but all over me this time. My outer skin must have grown into the metal covering, and now the covering is gone, taking most of the skin with it.

Even my eyelids are in flames. I'm still screaming, and other screams mix with mine. My eyes open; looking at me is Armana, alive and fully dressed. He's not screaming.

Free from the stiffening chemicals of the stat treatment, my limbs collapse, and I sprawl on a carpeted floor. The carpet pile claws at my exposed flesh. Tangled with me is Nadienne; we shriek together.

I stare up with burning eyes; here's Ma with a 'caine spray laying it on us. The 'caine takes hold and we stop screaming.

I try to get up, and remember I'm naked. We're in Ma's sitting room, surrounded by voluptuous statuary of all sizes and shapes, mostly in plast. On the wall, animated panels undulate through erotic cycles.

I inspect the patches of intact skin where my body and Nadienne's were touching. "Ouch!" I say as I poke at a patch on my belly.

"Shut up," Ma says, "after all that screaming, they'll think I'm having one of those parties."

I point at Armana. "Listen, Ma, what's he doing here? And can't we get something to cover us?"

"The spray only heals if the skin is exposed to air, or that's what the procedure told us," Ma says, looking us over. "It took Armana six months to worm that stat reversal process out of the City archive. Your friend Georg hid it very well. Warming you up took a day and a half." She gestures at an infra heater. "As far as anything else is concerned, well, that's a private matter between Armana Sorjiest and me."

So. Another lover, and this one owes me a lot of metal. Thanks to Armana, I'm back to life, and depressed already. I catch him eyeing me.

"What're you looking at, Squish?"

"You were good art," he says in that gentle voice.

I try Ma's own tactics on her, without much hope. "So you're with him now? What about me?"

"It was necessary," Ma says in that crisp tone. "You have the attention span of a streetrat. Without him, you'd be dead." She shrugs and gives me her 'You'll never get it' look.

Nadienne gasps, struggling to her feet. I stagger up, and stumble after her, both of us pink and red and brown and bleeding, into the shower room. Before we can close the door, she starts to sob. Just before the stat hit us, she was crying, and the tears left some wobbly intact strips of skin running down from her eyes.

"Georg?" I ask.

Nadienne nods and breaks down again.

"He wouldn't have been good for you," I start, on the wrong foot as usual.

"I know," she says, "but he was a big step up from you." She starts giggling and sobbing all at once. "Streetrat, that's the word I could never find."

"You lied to me about Georg." I don't need the pyro for this rush, it comes like an explosion. "Being a streetrat beats buttsucking the blues for a living."

She gets this look like I kicked her breath away. "Georg died saving your life. It beats bee-essing your own ma."

I draw back a hand, fast, and then I stop, because she loses the giggle and the sobs, and she faces me and doesn't flinch.

"It's all right. Go ahead. That's your answer to me, once again, like always, and every time, I come back for you." Her face is set, round and teary and blistered-looking, and her hair's ratted and mangled from the stat, but the line of her lower lip curves just so, and she's perfectly still. That stillness stops me colder than the stat.

"Nadienne. I'm sorry." I turn around and walk out of the shower room, and I think, *You've lost her forever, fool.* On the way I grab a long thin towel from a rack on the stone wall and hold it up in front of me. I'm feeling nasty. I hate having a creep like Armana bring me back to life.

In the sitting room, with Armana standing behind her, Ma is waiting. "We've got to get you away before that Rask stops in here again."

"Ma, why? Why did you bother?"

"Bother what?"

"Saving me."

"What a question. I'm your mader, isn't that — "

"So you put me and her on display in your place?"

"That's a terrible thing to say! After I saved your life. Don't you want to know — "

"Who did you save it for?"

She splutters for a second.

"Goodbye, Ma." I walk over to the door.

"You can't leave just like that!" She comes over to me. "They'll find you, and then they'll — "

"Come looking for you?"

She opens her mouth fast, then shuts it, and slowly nods. That's the way she's always been, deep down. Finally she's admitting it.

In a recess closet I find a coverall that fits me. It sets my skin afire again. "I didn't ask you for any of this, and I don't want it. I'll take my chances out there, and you can take your own. I'm not staying here. Just tell Nadienne I'll be around."

"Tomy — "

"Goodbye, Ma." I open the door and look up and down the understreet. It's dark — middle of the night-half — and I know where Jackie B will be, probably zagged that I still owe him the pyro, it was half a year ago, wasn't it? So I'll get it over in Rumchi, where Rask won't go, and I'll make Jackie B my own again. I need him.

I get to my old place in a crevice off Jarmann Street, this tiny squeeze-hole with one yellow ceiling strip-lamp, and I smear my body with FastMend and 'caine, and I slip on my old black bodysuit. Then I unhide my bottle of pyro caps, and I get ready to drop the last four, and I stop.

Pyro's got me just like it's got Jackie B, but six months in stat have loosened its grip. I clutch those caps and I slide to the back of the squeeze past the cabinet with the three books of Thringe's poems and the vids of her performing with her shock band up at Tyrae a year ago. My bed takes up half the width of the squeeze, and it's just wide enough to hold me. The squeeze smells like rotted fruit, my last home meal half a year back.

Just beyond the bed stands the white lat box, with its touch of piss-aroma, its lid up. I want to flush the caps away, but my arm and my hand go out and come back and the caps are still clutched in my fingers. Then I want to drop them in my mouth but I keep dragging my hand away again. I go back and forth like that four times.

Streetrat, Ma called me.

My arm jerking, I throw the caps down the lat, and slap down the lid to flush it. There. I lie down on my bed and look up at the narrow, rounded ceiling arch; water gurgles, the lat cycles again, and I feel virtuous and clean for a few breaths just like the so many times I've tried this before.

I must have just slept. Nothing has changed; the air vent still sighs, the ceiling light's yellow glow eats into the litter on my floor: trashed pharma boxes from my last stolen pyro shipment, tattered and soiled undersuits, crusts of sweetloaf. Now the pyro calls with that sexual tug at my spine. *"Come and take me into you, Tomas, be my woman. Let me pump your noose for you."*

Frantic, I rummage for the stash of metal I keep for times like this, and I remember that I used it the night before Nadienne and Georg came to me.

Nothing there. No metal, no pyro, so I'll have to knock down some new metal. And not find Rask and the Argaz. If they see me, they'll kill me and my ma. I rub my tender, almost-skinless arm.

Essa. I'd forgotten all about her. If she's still working at Caladrina's, she should be almost home to her own squeeze by now. She lives up near Naga Zone, off Ring Seven not far from Aswar Nagrasai. I don't like it up there — too high-nosed for me, at least until they come down to me with the song in their crotch and beg me for pyro. Down here, sweating in their highstyle catsuits and trying not to look scared, they're mine just like Jackie B. But he stays.

Like it or not, I climb the screw to Essa's.

Essa says through the steel door, "Fuck off, Yudo."

Yudo? Probably her tenth new guy since I got frozen. Sounds like an eleventh is on the way. "Essa, dis Tomas."

"Yudo, I said — "

"Essa, I walked out on my ma."

A short silence. "Tomas? What's your ma's favorite drink?" She's screening. Must be a bad area. I check the empty street for the scuffling noise I just heard.

"I don't know, that blue shit you guys serve, come on."

A long pause, a sliding sound and a click, and the door opens out toward me. She's standing in the entrance, that sleek body of hers looking back at me through her thin black watersuit as bad as pyro does inside me.

"The drink's a Loc-Ceru," she says, beckoning me inside, "but I don't think you care right now. Welcome back. You're out of stat? And running from Rask again, right? The Pit, look at your skin. Come here, I've got some soother." She wiggles on ahead to the sitting room, decorated with her favorite deep-view treescapes. They make me dizzy.

I don't care right now, not even about Rask or the Argaz, not even about my ma, not even about Nadienne. I'm watching Essa sit down very slowly on a long soft couch in the middle of the room, soft light glowing from the low dome ceiling to give her old-ivory skin a golden sheen. Six months and more. This rush isn't pyro, but I fight to remember why I came.

"Essa, I — "

" — need metal, right? That's what brought you up here last year, for the only time." She adopts a wounded look and pulls a sprayer from a side table.

"Yes." I wish she wouldn't remind me how dumb I am.

"How much this time? Should I just add it to last year's? Or should I put it on Rask's tab?" She gives me this heartless grin. "Come here, I'll fix you up."

I remember Nadienne giggling over "streetrat" and I turn around so Essa won't see the color of my face. "Forget it. I'll go back and find it where I live, bitch."

"Wait, Tomas. Aren't you afraid they'll catch you again?"

"They did once. I lived through it. Forget it, Essa, I'll just go down and find Jackie B and he'll connect me."

"Jackie B is dead. Rask shot him."

My knees remind me that I haven't eaten anything since waking up, and I don't have any family or friends, and I still have those enemies, and I'm destroying the very last good thing I've got. I sink down on Essa's carpet and tears run down my face.

Essa lies face down in the wet carpet pile, her pale puff of hair now slicked against her head.

It takes a while. She massages the soother into my peeled areas and feeds me some Zill burgs and some sweetwater, and I tell her about the stat and Nadienne and my ma, and she tells me how Rask played with Jackie B before he died. I don't tell her about flushing the pyro down the lat box. She slips off her suit.

She makes love to me, slow and gentle and full of tears and clutches, right up through the beautiful places that never used to last, going on and on now until I fall asleep with her legs woven across mine, flat on the deep pile of her purple carpet.

"Pyro takes all this away." My own words. I stare at the sounds as they leave my mouth. Loving on pyro is so fast, an explosion. This is new.

She nods lazily. "I found that out years ago."

Banging on the door. Essa jumps up and grabs for a coverall.

"You expecting anyone? Yudo, maybe?" I'm back on my feet, wobbling and fumbling into my bodysuit.

"No," she snaps. More banging.

A woman's muffled voice. "Essa? Essa?" It sounds familiar.

"Who are you?" Essa has a clipgun in one hand, the door handle in the other. Clipguns spit twenty nail-shaped bullets in a second — useful for close encounters with door-to-door bad manners.

"Nadienne. Please let me in." Her voice is ripping with fear.

Essa looks at me; I nod. Damn. She opens the door a crack, then reaches out and yanks. In flies Nadienne, looking back, and she says, "Cover!"

Essa slams the door and rams the big bolts, and we all scramble back to the sitting room and get out of the line of the door, our backs against the two-meter-thick stone pier of the City that stands between the arches of the street and the dwelling spaces.

"It's — " Nadienne begins, but the stream of bullets roaring past us says it: Rask. Molten steel splashes against the opposite wall, chews Essa's treescapes into clouds of green shreds that float softly down, and spits ricocheting sparks and fragments of stone and metal all around Essa's place. Incendiaries in the stream kindle flames in the carpet. We duck and grovel, squeezing together. Essa screams and stops.

I hold my breath, not moving, trying not to tremble as the smoke thickens. No sound except a distant rattle of cartridge casings kicked across a stone floor, and a curse. Then just the crackle and shrivel of the carpet, and the soft fall of firequench mist from the ceiling nozzles. The firequench adds a musty floral smell to the cooked carpet's odor.

Nadienne's rigid face shows clenched teeth as she arches her back and digs bloody fingertips into the carpet, trying to stay silent; the firequench rakes her nonexistent skin with pain. I take a chance and get up and step through the still-sizzling spots to find Essa's medbox. I bring the 'caine back and drench Nadienne with it. She looks up gratefully.

Essa lies face down in the wet carpet pile, her pale puff of hair now slicked against her head. She looks like a tanned version of Rask. The tiniest nick, with just a drop of blood at one end, shows on her left temple. Her clipgun rests a hand-length away from her fingertips.

I put an ear to her back, same place I was a little while ago, while the firequench trickles into my other ear. Nothing. I listen again. And nothing.

"She's dead," I whisper to Nadienne.

Nadienne lowers her face into the carpet like she wants to drown in the quench. I get up again and go look at the door. Essa gets credit; it's a half-inch thick plate of steel, with craters and holes all through it so I can see the empty street outside. But it held. Except for Essa.

Maybe I'll be able to cry again, like I did with her before, that only and final time. I don't know. I kneel down by Nadienne and I say, "Why'd you come up here?"

She picks up her head and looks at me, and her eyes are bloated with crying and death. "To warn you. Rask showed just after we all left your mader's place."

"Is Ma — ?" I don't want to ask this.

"She went upcity with Armana. I didn't see which way."

"Why didn't you go with them?" This is when the pyro really digs in, grabs at me and says, *I can get you out of this hole.* I try to listen to Nadienne as her lips move for a moment without words.

Finally, "It's you. I couldn't — " She stops and turns her head away.

She came back for me. Why does that feel so bad? I just kneel there and wait as she looks at me again with those dead eyes. Is this love? None of this works in my head: Jackie B and Georg and Essa all dead, and here's Nadienne back to me again. I just lower my head and shake it slowly.

The City blues come. They take statements, talk to each of us separately, ask us lots of detailed questions, record the whole scene, take Essa's body, and leave us standing in her bedroom where the firequench didn't fall. Here the walls are pale blue with undulating dark-blue shimmers, and the ceiling dome is paler blue and white. Like what they call a sea. Essa's bed, covered with a thin sheet and blanket, is soft on the surface but hard when pressed. Like Essa was.

I sit down on its edge. "Nadienne, tell me what's going on. We're both gonna die anyway."

She sits down next to me, not touching me. Her voice is flat. "Georg wasn't at Warr's, the day I saw you. It was an informant. When I took Armana to Ogi's, that was to meet Georg and relay the data to the City. It turned out to be the proc for reversing stat." Her voice is flat.

"So you and Georg worked for the blues?"

"Yeah, but Rask has my voicefile and she loads from the comm people, so I couldn't call the City. Georg made the call to them. He was good to me." Her shoulders start to shake. I just wait. "Shit. Oh, Tomas, it's so bad. If you'd thought Georg was still alive, you'd have killed him. I wanted to stop the pyro. It's killing us all. It's killing you."

"Yes." So she lied, and then she came back for me. I want to blame Nadienne and hug her, beat her up and heal her, but I can't say or do anything more, just stare down at the blue carpet in here. A thought creeps up to me and I kick it away, but it comes back. Then the pyro voice steps in front of it and says, *Go away. It's not Tomy's fault. He's my boy. I take good care of him.* The pyro sounds like Ma.

Nadienne stares off through Essa's bedroom door at the mess outside. I reach out for that creeping thought, and it says to me, *You did all this, Tomas. The day you grabbed your first bolt of pyro, you did this. What are you going to do now?*

It takes a few long breaths, and then I know. I pat Nadienne's hand. "Deenie, I'm going to work."

"What?" She sounds dull.

"I'm going to turn this around." I find Essa's clipgun where I'd stashed it away from the blues, and dig around until I find her ammunition cask, and pull the long bandoliers out to wrap around me, under my bodysuit, for the street. "You took the first step, coming to find me. It's my turn."

She looks resigned like she doesn't believe this any more than she believed the old lies I told her. Then she holds out a hand. "I'll carry the rest of those." I hand her the last three bandoliers, and she folds them into the carapiece she wears on her back. "Tomas, you're crazy."

Two days of skinseal treatments over in Rumchi Zone give us time to regroup. The clipgun is safe with Nadienne — she can use it if Rask sends her a visitor. I'm holding Jackie B's old beamshooter now, standing just inside his squeeze, off Ring Six. It's big, my hand barely fits around the worn black grip. It's far too heavy for me to use one-handed, so I'll practice with two hands, over in the City's huge rubbish bins. I slip outside and lock up. Jackie B would like very much what I'm going to do with his gun.

In the dark, I worm the infoaccess tunnel up to Rask's street in Naga. When I get there I whisper, "Simeon, little brother, I wish I could show you this place." I squat and release the lock. The tunnel hatch below me cracks open into a screen of leaves. It's over a broad street with gorgeous wall vines that curl up onto the ceiling and spill purple and violet blossoms under the striplamps. Spikefoot sparrows nest in the vines. It's quiet up here. Rask is rich. I pull the hatch shut again. Tonight, right here, she'll die.

Ma saved Nadienne and me, thawed us out. But she's with Armana. Right now I don't want to think about her. One hell at a time.

I feel in the dark tunnel for extra gripping points. Besides the conduits, rungs are all I find above the hatchdoor. I'll have to open it when Rask comes by, drop down, target her, fire, and get back up before her cocks roast me.

She's been tried before. Last year the Gellin Sintherou Coll nearly blew her apart, but her luck and speed got her out of range of the fuel bomb down near Tyrae. It wiped two families clean, and three shops, and started a fire that took a day to put out.

I wonder why she doesn't worry about these tunnels. It's as if she's had them inspected or monitors them. Maybe I tripped something and it's all been set up, and I'll die right here, or she'll trap me and fill me with her little bugs, and watch me die from the inside out.

I want a quad of pyro so badly I can feel the caps sliding down my throat.

A noise above me stops my breath. A rat? Maybe a foot? I don't want to light a chemtorch. I lug the beamshooter up to aim above me, and whisper, "Talk." My finger tightens.

"Tomas?" Nadienne. She's come to back me up, but I'm afraid for her. This was my job.

"Nadienne?" I work my way up. Something's in her voice, an odd tone, like something's not right.

Continued on page 96

It was a good thing indeed to be the Master of one's Domain. But it is even better to be the Master of the Universe.

DEEP SPACE SEIN

BY THOMAS MARCINKO
Illustration by Charles Demorat

ESTABLISHING SHOT OF STATION — BASS RIFF. CUT TO: The operations bridge of the station. Jerry's in a red Starfleet uniform, talking on his communicator badge. There's a sandwich sitting on the main control panel.

Jerry: You know, I've never been to a comedy club in the Gamma Quadrant.

... But what's the deal with those shapeshifters? ... I mean, how do they decide what shape to wear when they get up in the morning? ...

Do they say, hey, I'm feeling kinda *avian* this morning? Yesterday I was a giant *lobster*, but today I'm in the mood for something a little more *vertebrate*? And how do they recognize each other? Hi, John, hey, I love the new body. Being a fifty-meter wooly mammoth suits you. I wouldn't've thought you were a pachyderm kind of guy, though ... .

Buzzer goes off.

Jerry: Just a second ... Who is it?

George (v.o.): It's me.

Jerry: Beam on over. *(To communicator)* OK ... Stardate 16-19-point five. I'll be there! Yes! Thank you! Goodbye!

George materializes. He's wearing a gold Starfleet uniform. Walks over to replicator, takes drink out.

Jerry: Guess what! I'm going to the Gamma Quadrant!

George: Gamma Quadrant! No kidding!

Jerry: It's a benefit for the Jem'Hadar.

George: Are they the ones with the loops on the backs of their heads? What are *those* all about?

Jerry (as if it's obvious): So the Dominion can control them! And when they get out of hand, just grab the loop.

George: That's a great idea!

Jerry: Great idea? Of course it's a great idea! We should start breeding children with loops! Program them with a gene sequence so that the loop drops off when they reach adulthood! Discipline problems with offspring would disappear overnight!

George (snaps fingers): I love the loop idea.

Jerry: Gotta love the loop!

George: I've always wanted to go to the Gamma Quadrant.

Jerry: Why not come along?

George: Maybe I will ... .

Buzzer goes off.

Jerry (answers): Yeah?

Elaine (v.o.): It's me!

Jerry: Beam on up!

When Jerry turns, George is looking at a computer screen, tugging his lips, making a face.

Jerry: Now what?

George: I'm thinking of getting my teeth sharpened.

Jerry: Your teeth sharpened? How come?

George: I think it would be great for biting and clawing in hand to hand combat.

Jerry: Yeah, I can see where a many-times-decorated hero like you would have a real need to gouge.

George: Hey, the Klingons sharpen their teeth. The Ferengi sharpen their teeth. Why shouldn't humans?

Elaine materializes. She's wearing a blue counselor's outfit.

Elaine: That's it! I'm leaving Starfleet!

George walks over to the main console, takes a bite of Jerry's sandwich, looks at sandwich, puts it down.

Jerry: What's the problem now?

Elaine: First thing Monday! *(Gesture of philosophical resignation):* "Hello, Maquis? Where do I sign up?"

Jerry: All right. Tell. What happened?

Elaine: I was going out with this warp-core engineer ...

Jerry: The Vulcan?

Elaine: Yeah, the Vulcan. Anyway, we're breaking up. He says I'm not logical enough for him.

Jerry: The nerve of that Vulcan!

Elaine: Tell me about it!

Jerry: Why, you're the most logical human I know!

Elaine: That's what I told him!

Jerry: What did he say?

Elaine: This is so embarrassing .... .

Jerry: Come on, out with it!

Elaine: You know how they go through that ... thing?

George: What thing?

Elaine: You know — the thing.

George: No — I *don't* know!

Jerry: I believe Elaine is referring to the infamous Vulcan once-every-seven-years thing.

George: Oh-HO! The seven-*year* thing! And he's picking *now* to break up with you?

Elaine: Yeah, and get this. He says I'm not what he's looking for, and he doesn't want to use his spawn cycle on me!

Jerry: No spawning?

Elaine: No spawning!

Jerry: He thinks you're not spawn-worthy?!?

George: Ho, boy! The nerve of those Vulcans!

Jerry (conceding): Still ...

George (conceding): Gotta love the Vulcans.

Jerry: Love the Vulcans. They're really logical, right, Laney?

Elaine (makes face, mocks him): Yeah, gotta love the Vulcans — the Vulcans are soooo logical! I'll tell you right now, I for one am sick of the Vulcans being so logical! — You know, I don't think he's spawning at all. I think he's making it up as an excuse to break up with me.

Jerry: How do you know?

Elaine: I know, all right. He says he's due to spawn on Thursday. I'd just love to catch him.

Jerry: Now let me get this straight. You

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want to go all the way to Vulcan just to catch him *not* spawning with anyone?

Elaine: Exactly!

Kramer materializes unannounced — stumbles off transporter pad. He's wearing a yellow Bajoran uniform and a chain on his ear. He notices George, who has gone back to looking at his reflection.

Kramer: What's up with George?

Jerry: He's thinking of having his teeth sharpened.

Kramer: You should! You'll look just like a Klingon!

Kramer goes over to replicator. Fruit materializes — Kramer starts to eat it. Meanwhile, Elaine goes to the console, takes a bite of Jerry's sandwich, looks at it, and puts it down.

Kramer: Hey, Jerry, can I borrow your runabout?

Jerry: What for?

Kramer: I thought I'd take a little spin in Dominion Territory. You know, seek out new life, new civilizations . . . .

Jerry: You? Seek? You never seek!

Kramer: Hey, I seek! I seek all the time!

Jerry: I'd like to see you seek! I've never seen you seek.

Kramer: Oh, I've sought, Jerry! I've sought a lot!

Jerry: You've sought. Sure you have. Anyway, you can't. The containment field's out of balance.

Kramer: Well, let me have it and I'll get it fixed for you. I know this Ferengi who'll fix it right up — even install a cloaking device! A cloaking device, Jerry!

Elaine: A cloaking device! Get *out* of here!

George: A cloaking device? The Ferengi don't have the cloaking device!

Kramer: They do now! All they need is somebody to bring it through the wormhole and get it for them! They'll fix your runabout for free!

Jerry: No, absolutely not, no way! *Nobody's* bringing forbidden technology through *my* wormhole!

Kramer: But Jerry! They said we could use their cloaking device anytime we want! Imagine! Your own cloaking device in your own runabout!

George: Think about that . . . You could run about cloaked.

Kramer: Cloaked, Jerry! Cloaked!

Jerry: Oh, all right — but I'll need it back by Stardate 16-19-point five. I'll need it for my show in the Gamma Quadrant.

Kramer: Giddyup! *He beams away.*

Elaine: Hey, wait a minute — *I* could use a cloaking device!

Jerry: Oh, no . . . not for the Vulcan.

Elaine: Jerry, when he brings that cloaking device back, you've *got* to let me borrow it. Please? Oh, please, Jerry? Please?

George: Hey, something's coming through the wormhole!

Jerry: On screen!

On screen we see Newman, with implants and cables and lenses all over his face. He's been turned into a Borg.

Jerry: Hello . . . Newman!

Newman (blandly): Hello, Jerry.

Jerry: Well, look who's been assimilated.

Newman: And it's brought me a peace unlike any I've ever known before in my organic life, Jerry.

Jerry: What do you want, Newman?

Newman (cackling): Surrender your station or face certain destruction! Your weapons are useless against us!

Jerry (folds his arms): Oh yeah? And what weapons would those be?

Newman: We have phasers, Jerry.

Jerry: We've got phasers too.

Newman: We also have photon torpedoes.

Jerry: Who doesn't? How about quantum disruptors? You got those?

Newman: Of course we have quantum disruptors! Do you take us for fools, Jerry? This time you'll be assimilated! Assimilated, do you hear me! Assimilated for sure! Ha ha ha ha!

Jerry: And of course I'm sure you've got the Genesis Device.

Newman (pauses . . . his lip starts to quiver): The Genesis Device? Surely — surely you jest?

Jerry: Do I? You think the Federation would leave us all the way out here on the edge of the final frontier without giving us a Genesis Device to protect us? I think not!

Newman: Perhaps I was hasty . . . .

Jerry: Get out of here, Newman!

Newman vanishes from screen. George and Elaine look at each other.

Elaine: Just out of curiosity . . . do we *have* a Genesis Device?

Jerry: Nah.

Elaine: Is there such a *thing* as a Genesis Device?

Jerry: Not to my knowledge . . . .

George: Hey, I thought we were having lunch.

Cut to: Establishing shot of Quark's as seen from promenade. Bass riff. Cut to: Jerry, George, and Elaine at table inside.

George: I am so excited about this trip to the Gamma Quadrant! The Gamma Quadrant, Jerry! The Gamma Quadrant!

Jerry: You like saying "Gamma Quadrant," don't you?

George: Yeah? So? I like saying "Gamma Quadrant." So what? Can't I say "Gamma Quadrant" anytime I want to say "Gamma Quadrant"?

Jerry: Enough with the Gamma Quadrant, already!

Elaine: Anyway — Jerry, you've got to let me borrow your cloaking device!

Jerry: Elaine, how can I give you the cloaking device *and* make it to the Jem'Hadar benefit concert at the same time?

Elaine: So take the *Defiant*! *I'll* take the runabout to Vulcan.

Jerry: I can't take the *Defiant*! The *Defiant* is an armed to the teeth war machine! You can't take a war machine to a comedy club! Ya *see*, the whole *reason* you go to a comedy club is to make people *laugh*! You don't go to

a comedy club to say, "Our phasers are trained on your major population centers and your weapons are useless against us!"

Elaine: Well, it looks like you'll have to take your chances, won't you? Unless you can think of a way to be in two places at once.

George (snaps fingers): There might be a way!

Jerry: Oh, no ...

George: The mirror universe!

Jerry: Not the mirror universe!

Elaine: Yes! The mirror universe!

Jerry: No way am I going back to the mirror universe. Last time I was there my identical counterpart was having a better time than I was. I can't put up with that!

Elaine: Well, if your counterpart is having more fun than you are, then he's not your *identical* counterpart, is he?

George: I'd love to see what my counterpart is up to.

Jerry: You would, would you?

Elaine: Why's that, George?

George: Because I *know* my counterpart is having a better time than me. He's a smarter, wealthier, happier me.

Jerry: And this makes you happy.

George: Yes! If *I* can't be happy, then the least I can do is watch *me* having a good time!

Elaine: Oh, please, Jerry! Please, please! I love my evil counterpart! I learned sooooo much from her!

Jerry: No! We're not goin' and that's that!

Elaine: Of course ... my evil counterpart *is* kind of sexy.

George: She is. I've seen her. She's pretty sexy, Jerry.

Elaine: And I think she likes you, Jerry.

Jerry: She does?

Elaine: She told me she does. She said it's too bad you inhabit a different universe and that you're sworn enemies in her world — otherwise she'd date you in a minute.

Jerry: She would, huh?

Elaine: Aw, Jerry! Let's go! It'd be so much fun!

Jerry: All right! — Where's Kramer? He was supposed to meet us here.

Elaine: I just hope he didn't take a shortcut through the Neutral Zone.

George: Hey, not even Kramer would do a thing like that.

Cut to: Establishing shot of Ferengi ship. Bass riff. Cut to: Interior Ferengi ship. Kramer is messing with a Ferengi tricorder.

Ferengi: Kramer, tell Jerry he's gonna love this cloaking device. And remember, you can use it any time you want.

Kramer (preoccupied by tricorder): Great ... yeah ... .

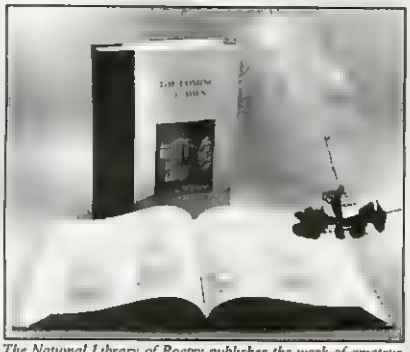
Tricorder suddenly starts to work — Kramer is startled — fumbles it — falls all over himself trying to grab it —

Kramer: Look at the time! I'm late for my rendezvous with Jerry!

Ferengi: Don't worry. I know a shortcut. □

Poetry Contest $48,000.00 in Prizes

The National Library of Poetry to award 250 total prizes to amateur poets in coming months



The National Library of Poetry publishes the work of amateur poets in colorful hardbound anthologies like ***The Coming of Dawn****, pictured above. Each volume features poetry by a diverse mix of poets from all over the world.*

Owings Mills, Maryland – The National Library of Poetry has just announced that $48,000.00 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry. "We have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in ***ONLY ONE*** original poem, any subject, any style, to:

The National Library of Poetry

Suite 17510

1 Poetry Plaza

Owings Mills, MD 21117-6282

The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "All poets who enter will receive a response concerning their artistry, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely.

Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Previous anthologies published by the organization have included *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, *Of Diamonds and Rust*, and *Moments More to Go*, among others.

"Our anthologies routinely sell out because they are truly enjoyable reading, and they are also a sought-after sourcebook for poetic talent," added Mr. Ely.

World's Largest Poetry Organization

Having awarded over $150,000.00 in prizes to poets worldwide in recent years, The National Library of Poetry, founded in 1982 to promote the artistic accomplishments of contemporary poets, is the largest organization of its kind in the world. Anthologies published by the organization have featured poems by more than 100,000 poets.

"We're always looking for new poetic talent," said Mr. Ely. "I hope you urge your readers to enter the contest. There is absolutely no obligation whatsoever, and they could be our next big winner."

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Passionate WEIRDNESS

The author of *The Forever War* celebrates Ron Walotsky's unique artistic visions.

BY JOE HALDEMAN

RIGHT: *Walotsky's image for the cover of Marion Zimmer Bradley's classic novel* Darkover Landfall *brought to life one of the most beloved vistas in science fiction.*

WHEN YOU WALK THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR of Ron Walotsky's house in Florida, a two-story manse on a creek that leads to the Intracoastal Waterway, a mile from the ocean, it's a pleasant assault of color and form in zany celebration. Ron has his paintings hanging everywhere, ranging from corporate art to wall-sized abstracts to the excellent exuberant science fiction that graces these pages.

I'll put my own prejudices on the table and tell you that my favorite pieces could not be here, because I've been most drawn to and hypnotized by, the abstract compositions — dramatic in-your-face illusions that are modern avatars of classic *trompe l'oeil* technique: arm-sized snakes of paint seeming to float a foot off the canvas; a thousand pebbles in a stream, in huge

LEFT: *The playful cover to Rachel Pollack's novel* Temporary Agency *reflects the artist's fascination with the structure of horseshoe crabs, as explained by Joe Haldeman in the accompanying article.* RIGHT: *Ben Bova's* Promethians *shows that Walotsky is equally at home in deep space as he is on Earth.*

impossible close-up; carefully drafted geometric fantasies. Their absence here is understandable, and not just because this is a science fiction magazine.

WHEN RON'S AGENT PUTS ON GALLERY shows, she does either his abstract work or his science fiction, but not both. People get confused. Consumers and critics of art think of commercial art as one thing and "serious" art as another. But it's all serious, and it's all play, and it's all done by the same mind and hands, just working under different sets of constraints.

Good hands and an interesting mind. Ron has a solid academic background and is totally serious about his work, but doesn't look or act like an *artiste* — do any real artists? — but rather like a regular guy from Brooklyn, eager to show you his little beach town and kick back for a brew in a ramshackle bar overlooking the surf.

How he has *time* to be a regular guy is beyond me! I've known lots of artists, in and out of science fiction, and I know the only way to make a living outside of the academy is to be prolific. "Prolific" doesn't begin to describe Walotsky's output. You can spend hours looking at the paintings and pictures of the paintings that have been his life for the past thirty years. Mostly science fiction and fantasy, because those are his central passion — but alongside the abstract paintings there are dozens in other genres: Western, mystery, and mainstream book covers; psychedelic poster art from the seventies; luscious nudes for magazines like *Penthouse.* Album jackets for rock groups and musclebound heroes for *Heavy Metal.* Bits of sculpture and oddities that defy description.

In one corner of the studio, examples of an ongoing project, "Ancient Warriors of Lost Civilizations": a series of masks painted on the shells of horseshoe crabs (cleverly incorporated into the "Street Scene" painting that hangs above them). Neighborhood kids collect the shells off the beach and bring them to Ron for a dollar apiece. When I last visited that cluttered studio, there were three of these masks drying, their tails weirdly stuck in a Styrofoam block so the masks were upright and staring.

To an old Florida beachcomber who's seen thousands of horseshoe crabs, there's an unsettling cognitive dissonance: it's a crab, it's a face; it's a crab; it's a face ...Ron was working on two other paintings at the time, his back to the masks, which didn't look happy. If I were him I would have turned their faces to the wall.

Ron usually has several projects in various stages of completion, but like all commercial artists he often has to drop everything and race a deadline. I was looking forward to spending some time with him in Fort Lauderdale last month, where he was scheduled to be honored by the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts — but the phone rang and an editor asked whether he could do twelve paintings for a children's book in twenty days. Honors are nice, but work is what you do, so while the rest of us were down there basking under a thin layer of sunblock, Ron was cranking from dawn to midnight, loving it, chainsmoking and sucking coffee while he worked with his characteristic meticulousness. I haven't asked him, but I suspect he FedEx'ed the paintings, took time off for a sandwich, and then went back

LEFT: *The 25th Anniversary edition of Arthur C. Clarke's* 2001: A Space Odyssey *gave Walotsky a chance to mesh with a master.* BELOW: *This cover for* F&SF *evoked the artist Mondrian in Joe Haldeman's mind.* RIGHT: *The Science Fiction Book Club edition of Jack McDevitt's* A Talent For War *ably depicted the traditional sense of wonder that is at the heart of SF.*

to what he had been doing when the phone rang three weeks before.

LOVE OF THE ABSTRACT AND DOWN-right weird is evident in many of his paintings. It's obvious in the background of the space-suited figure from the cover of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, Mondrian blocks falling out of a fractal sky (and the reflection in his helmet shows that what's in front of him is as strange as what's behind him). The bulbous organic alien space ship illustrating Ben Bova's *Promethians* looks like a Gaudi dream interpreted through an alien sensibility. Even the more conventional hardware in the covers for Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Darkover Landfall* and Poul Anderson's *Tau Zero* have an eerie solid sensuality to them.

Those three space ships well display Ron's versatile imagination. Most science fiction artists have a "canonical" space ship, which they use over and over, ringing in changes. These three look like the work of three independent artists. *The New York Times*' art critic Hilton Kramer recognized this when he noted that "Each of his pictures is an entirely individual conception. What unites them into a consistent stylistic statement is the character of their color and the means used to realize it ... a very romantic, slightly unearthly, slightly psychedelic color achieved through painstaking gradations of light. There is at once an almost electric quality to the color in Walotsky's paintings, and a dreamlike quality to the atmosphere they evoke."

Words like "romantic" and "dreamlike" don't come immediately to mind when you meet this energetic wise-cracking Brooklynite in his jeans and flannel, as out of place in a sleepy Florida town as an alligator in the Holland Tunnel. But when he picks up a brush to adjust a line or a tone, a change comes over him, like autohypnosis, a direct current between the painting and the painter. His connection to the work is absolute, and beautiful. □

For information on how you can own original painting by this artist, contact Worlds of Wonder at wowart1-@erols.com or the artist at gwalotsky@aol.com.

WALOTSKY

Enemies of the Galactic Empire were known to disappear. Sir Zeb had to make sure that the only thing that disappeared was the Galactic Empire itself.

GALAXIA

BY GREGORY BENFORD

Illustration by Bob Eggleton

THE CHASE ACROSS AN ENTIRE galaxy started at a swanky private party. Think of the galaxy as a swarm of gaudy bees, bright colors hovering in a ball. Then stomp them somehow in midair, so they bank and turn in a compressed disk. Dark bees fly with them too, so that somber lanes churn in the swiftly rotating cloud.

Angry bees, buzzing, stingers out. Churning endlessly in their search.

That is the galaxy, seen whole and quick. Stars have no will, but their courses and destinies were now guided by small entities of great pretension: humans, now lording it over the All.

Or such is the viewpoint of the lords and ladies of a galactic empire that stretches across that bee swarm disk: they loom above it all, oblivious. Stars do their bidding. The bees swarm at the lift of an Imperial eyebrow.

Until one of them turns upon another. Then they are as their origins made them: savvy omnivores, primates reared up and grimacing, teeth bared at each other. Across the span of a hundred billion worlds, ancient blood sings in pounding vessels.

Despite appearances, some of these primordial creatures were present at the party, yet seeming mild and splendid in their finery.

Of course, it all began innocently enough.

AN AMPLE, POWERFUL WOMAN NAMED VISSIAN GRASPED HIS sleeve and tugged him back to the ornate reception. "Sir Zeb, you are the *point* of this affair! Sir Zeb, my guests have so much to *tell* you."

And to think that he had *wanted* to come here! To get the scent of change. But already he was tiring of this world, Syrna. Sir Zeb, indeed. He truly did not enjoy travel all that much, a fact he often forgot.

Even here, in a distant Sector, the heavy hand of the Imperium lay upon style and art. The Imperium's essence lay in its solidity; its taste ran to the monumental. Rigorous straight lines in ascending slabs, the exact parabolas of arcing purple water fountains, heavy masonry — all entirely proper and devoid of embarrassing challenge. He sniffed at the hyperbolic draperies and moved toward the crowd, their faces terminally bland.

Vissian nattered on. " — and our most brilliant minds are waiting to meet you! Do come!"

He suppressed a groan and looked beseechingly at Fyrna, his consort now of a full decade; something of a record in Imperial circles. She smiled and shook her head. From this hazard she could not save him.

"Sir Zeb, what of the mysteries at galactic center?"

"I savor them."

"But are those magnetic entities a threat? They are huge!"

"And wise. Think of them as great slumbering libraries."

"But they command such energies!"

"Then think of them as natural wonders, like waterfalls."

This provoked a chorus of laughter in the polite half-moon crowd around him. "Some on the Council believe we should take action against them!" a narrow woman in flocked velvet called from the crowd's edge.

"I would sooner joust with the wind," Zeb said, taking a stim from a passing dwarf servant.

"Sir Zeb, surely you cannot take lightly — "

"I am on holiday, sir, and can take things as they are."

"But you, Sir Zeb, have seen these magnetic structures?"

"Filaments, hundreds of light years long — yes. Lovely, they are."

Wide©eyed: "Was it dangerous?"

"Of course. Nobody goes to the galactic center. Hard protons sleet through it, virulent x-rays light its pathways."

"Why did you risk it?"

"I am a fool, madam, who works for you, the people."

And so on.

If Vissian had begun as a grain of sand in his shoe, she became a boulder. An hour later, Fyrna whisked him into an alcove and said curtly, "I am concerned about someone tracking us here. We're just one worm-jump away from Fleet's quadrant assembly point."

Zeb had allowed himself to forget about politics: the only vacation a statesman had. "My protection should be good here. I can get a quick message out, using a wormlink to — "

"No, you ca"t work using a link. The Speculists could trace that easily."

Factions, factions. The situation had shifted while he was idling away here. As Governor of another Sector, he was a guest here, given nominal protection. He had his own bodyguards, too, salted among the crowd here. But the Speculists had strong support in this region of the galaxy and were quite blithely ruthless. Zeb stared out at the view, which he had to admit was spectacular. Great, stretching vistas. Riotous growth.

But more fires boiled up on the horizon. There was gaiety in the streets here©©and angst. Their laboratories seethed with fresh energies, innovation bristled everywhere, the air seemed to sing with change and chaos.

The extremes of wealth and destitution were appalling. Change brought that, he knew.

As a boy he had seen poverty — and lived it, too. His grandmother had insisted on buying him a raincoat several sizes too large, "to get more use out of it." His mother didn't like him playing kickball because he wore out his shoes too quickly.

Here, too, the truly poor were off in the hinterlands. Sometimes they couldn't even afford fossil fuels. Men and women peered over a mule's ass all day as it plodded down a furrow, while overhead starships screamed through velvet skies.

And here... Among these fast-track circles, body language was taught. There were carefully designed poses for Confidence, Impatience, Submission (four shadings), Threat, Esteem, Coyness and dozens more. Codified and understood unconsciously, each induced a specific desired neurological state in both self and others. The rudiments lay in dance, politics and the martial arts, but by being systematic, much more could be conveyed. Like language, a dictionary helped.

Zeb felt an unease in the reception party. Reading some veiled threat-postures? Or was he projecting?

Quickly he adjusted his own stance — radiating confidence, he hoped. But still, he had picked up a subconscious alarm. And he knew enough from decades of politics to trust his instincts.

"Governor!" Vissian's penetrating voice snatched away his thoughts.

"Uh, that tour of the precincts. I, I really don't feel — "

"Oh, that is not possible, I fear. A domestic disturbance, most unfortunate."

Zeb felt relief but Vissian went right on, bubbling over new ventures, balls and tours to come tomorrow. Then her eyebrows lifted and she said brightly, "Oh yes — I do have even more welcome news. An Imperial squadron has just come to call."

"Oh?" Fyrna shot back. "Under whose command?"

"An Admiral Kafalan. I just spoke to him — "

"Damn!" Fyrna said. "He's a Speculist henchman."

"You're sure?" Zeb asked. He knew her slight pause had been to consult her internal files.

Fyrna nodded. Vissian said gayly, "Well, I am sure he will be honored to return you to your Sector when you are finished with your visit here. Which we hope will not be soon, of — "

"He mentioned us?" Fyrna asked.

"He asked if you were enjoying — "

"Damn!" Zeb said.

"An Admiral commands all the worm links, if he wishes — yes?" Fyrna asked.

"Well, I suppose so." Vissian looked puzzled.

"We're trapped," Zeb said.

Vissian's eyes widened in shock. "But surely you, Governor, need fear no — "

"Quiet." Fyrna silenced the woman with a stern glance. "At best this Kafalan will bottle us up here."

Fyrna pushed them both into a side gallery. Vissian seemed startled by this, though Fyrna was both consort and body guard. Indeed, she and Zeb might as well have been married, but for the social impossibilities.

This side gallery featured storm-tossed jungles of an unnamed world lashed by sleeting rain, lit by jagged purple lightning. Strange howls called through the lashing winds.

"Note that if Imperial artists do show you an exterior, it is alarming," Fyrna said clinically as she checked her detectors, set into her spine and arms.

"They're still nearby?" Zeb asked, shushing Vissian.

"Yes, but of course they are beards."

To his puzzled look she said, "Meaning, the disguise we are meant to see."

"Ah." They strolled into the next gallery, trying to look casual. This senso was milder, a grandiose streetscape and hanging gardens. "Ummm, still poorly attended. And the real shadows?"

"I have spotted one. There must be more."

Vissian said, "But surely no one would dare kidnap you from my reception — "

"No, probably there will be an 'accident,'" Zeb said.

"Why has this Admiral moved to block you just now?"

AND HERE... AMONG THESE FAST-TRACK CIRCLES, BODY LANGUAGE WAS TAUGHT. THERE WERE CAREFULLY DESIGNED POSES FOR CONFIDENCE, IMPATIENCE, SUBMISSION, THREAT, ESTEEM, COYNESS AND DOZENS MORE.

"Nova triggers," Zeb said.

Once invented, triggers had made war far more dangerous. A solar system could be "cleansed"— a horrifyingly bland term used by aggressors of the time — by inducing a mild nova burst in a balmy sun. This roasted worlds just enough to kill all but those who could swiftly find caverns and store food for the few years of the nova stage. Fleet wanted a supply of them, and Zeb led opposition to the weapon.

"Admirals love their toys," he said sourly, fingering a stim but not inhaling it. They returned to the main party, not wanting to seem perturbed by the news.

"Is there no other way to get off Syrna?" Fyrna demanded of Vissian.

"No, I can't recall — "

"Think!"

Startled, Vissian said, "Well, of course, we do have privateers who at times use the wild worms, an activity that is at best quasi-legal, but — "

In Zeb's career he had discovered a curious little law. Now he turned it in his favor.

Bureaucracy increases as a doubling function in time, given resources. At the personal level, the cause is the persistent desire of every manager to hire at least one assistant. This provides the time constant for growth.

Eventually this collides with the carrying capacity of society. Given the time constant and the capacity, one could predict a plateau level of bureaucratic overhead — or else, if growth persists, the date of collapse. Predictions of the longevity of bureaucracy-driven societies fit a precise curve. Surprisingly, the same scaling laws worked for micro©societies such as large agencies.

The corpulent Imperial bureaus on Syrna could not move swiftly. Admiral Kafalan's squadron had to stay in planetary space, since it was paying a purely formal visit. Niceties were still observed. Kafalan did not want to use brute force when a waiting game would work.

"I see. That gives us a few days," Fyrna concluded.

Zeb nodded. He had done the required speaking, negotiating, dealing, promising favors©©all activities he disliked intensely. Fyrna had done the background digging. "To...?"

"Train."

THE WORMHOLE WEB HAD BUILT THE GALACTIC EMPIRE. MADE IN the first blaring instant of the Great Emergence, found (rarely) floating between stars, they now were the most precious resource of all.

Of course, worms ended and began as they liked. A worm jump could bring you to a black vacuum still many years from a far-flung world. Hyperships flitted through wormholes in mere seconds, then exhausted themselves hauling their cargoes across empty voids, years and decades in the labor.

Wormholes were labyrinths, not mere tunnels with two ends. The large ones held firm for perhaps billions of years — none larger than a hundred meters across had yet collapsed. The smallest could sometimes last only hours, at best a year. In the thinner worms, flexes in the wormwalls *during* passage could alter the end point of a traveler's trajectory.

Worse, worms in their last stages spawned transient, doomed young — the wild worms. As deformations in space-time, supported by negative energy-density "struts", all wormholes were inherently rickety. As they failed, smaller deformations twisted away.

Syrna had seven wormholes. One was dying in gorgeous agonies.

It hung a light-hour away, spitting out wild worms that ranged from a hand's-width size up to several meters. In the spongy spacetime of the negative-energy-density struts, time could crawl or zip, quite unpredictably. This worm was departing our universe in molasses-slow torment.

A fairly sizable wild worm had sprouted out of the side of the dying worm several months before. The Imperial squadron did not know of this, of course. All worms were taxed, so a fresh, free wormhole was a bonanza. Reporting their existence, well, often a planet simply didn't get around to that until the wild worm had fizzled away in a spray of subatomic surf.

Until then, pilots carried cargo through them. That wild worms could evaporate with only seconds' warning made their trade dangerous, highly paid, and legendary.

Wormriders were the sort of people who as children liked to ride their bicycles no-handed, but with a difference — they rode off rooftops.

By an odd logic, that kind of child grew up and got trained and even paid taxes — but inside, they stayed the same.

Only risk takers could power through the chaotic flux of a transient worm and take the risks that worked, *not* take those that didn't, and live. They had elevated bravado to its finer points.

"This wild worm, it's tricky," a grizzled woman told Zeb andFyrna. "No room for a pilot if you both go."

"We must stay together," Fyrna said with finality.

"Then you'll have to pilot."

"We don't know how," Zeb said.

"You're in luck." The lined woman grinned without humor. "This wildy's short, easy."

"What are the risks?" Fyrna demanded stiffly.

"I'm not an insurance agent, lady."

"I insist that we know — "

"Look, lady, we'll teach you. That's the deal."

"I had hoped for a more — "

"Give it a rest or it's no deal at all."

In the men's room, above the urinal he used, Zeb saw a small gold plaque: *Senior Pilot Joquan Beunn relieved himself here Octdent 4, 13,435.*

Every urinal had a similar plaque. There was a washing machine in the locker room with a large plaque over it, reading *The entire 43rd Pilot Corps relieved themselves here Marlass 18, 13,675.*

Pilot humor. It turned out to be absolutely predictive. He messed himself on his first training run.

As if to make the absolutely fatal length of a closing wormhole less daunting, the worm flyers had escape plans. These could only work in the fringing fields of the worm, where gravity was beginning to warp, and space-time was only mildly curved. Under the seat was a small, powerful rocket that propelled the entire cockpit out, automatically heading away from the worm.

There is a limit to how much self-actuated tech one can pack into a small cockpit, though. Worse, worm mouths were alive with electrodynamic "weather"! — writhing forks of lightning, blue discharges, red magnetic whorls like tornadoes. Electrical gear didn't work well if a bad storm was brewing at the mouth. So most of the emergency controls were manual. Hopelessly archaic, but unavoidable.

He and Fyrna went through a bail-out training program. Quite soon

EVERYONE SEEMED TO ASSUME THAT SINCE HE WAS THIS FAMOUS POLITICIAN TRAINED IN INTRICATE GALACTIC PROTOCOLS HE COULD OF COURSE KEEP AN ENTIRE MENU OF INSTRUCTIONS STRAIGHT, TIMED DOWN TO FRACTIONS OF SECONDS.

it was clear that if he used the EJECT command he had better be sure that he had his head tilted back. That is, unless he wanted his kneecaps to slam up into his chin, which would be unfortunate, because he would be trying to check if his canopy had gone into a spin. This would be bad news, because his trajectory might get warped back into the worm. To correct any spin he had to yank on a red lever, and if that failed he had to then very quickly — in pilot's terms, this meant about half a second — punch two blue knobs. When the spindown came, he then had to be sure to release the automatic actuator by pulling down on two yellow tabs, being certain that he sit up straight with hands between knees to avoid...

...and so on for three hours. Everyone seemed to assume that since he was this famous politician trained in intricate galactic protocols he could of course keep an entire menu of instructions straight, timed down to fractions of seconds.

After the first ten minutes he saw no point in destroying their illusions, and simply nodded and squinted to show that he was carefully keeping track and absolutely enthralled. Meanwhile he solved chess puzzles in his head for practice.

HE WAS TAKING A STROLL WITH HIS BODYGUARDS WHEN THE Admiral sent a greeting card. The guard nearest him, one Ladoro, was saying something into his wrist comm as they ambled through a park. It was an Imperial distraction, with babbling brooks that ran uphill, this artful effect arising from intricately charged electrodynamic streams that countered gravity. His guards liked the effect; Zeb found it rather obvious.

He chanced to be looking toward Ladoro, his oldest guard, a stout fellow whose personal service went back a full century. Later Zeb reflected that the Admiral probably knew that. It made what happened more pointed.

Ladoro went down with his head jerked back, as if he were looking up at the sky, a quizzical expression flickering. Over backwards, twisting, then down hard. He hit face first on the carpet©moss. Ladoro had not lifted his hands to break the fall.

Two other guards had Zeb behind a wall within two seconds. There was too much open space and too little shelter to try a move. He squatted and fumed and could not see what had fired the shot. Zeb risked a quick look over the wall's low edge and saw Ladoro sprawled flat without a twitch.

Then a lot of nothing happened. No following pulses.

Zeb replayed the image. From Ladoro had spouted rosy blood from a punch high in the spine. Absolutely dead center, four centimeters below the neck. Kilojoules of energy focused to a spot the size of a fingernail.

That much energy delivered so precisely would have done the job even if it hit the hip or gut. Delivered so exactly, it burst the big bony axis of the man, massive pressures in the spinal fluid, a sudden breeze blowing out a candle, the brain going black in a millisecond.

Ladoro had gone down boneless, erased. A soft, liquid thump, then eternal silence.

Zeb held up his hand and watched it tremble for a while. Enough waiting. "Let's go. They can lob anything they want here."

A guard said, "Sir Zeb, I don't advise — "

"I've been shot at before, kid."

"Well, I suppose we could fire as we move — "

"You do that. Go."

They worked their way along a creek frothing uphill. More guards arrived and spilled out across the park. The pulse had come from behind Ladoro. Zeb kept plenty of rock between him and that direction. He got to Ladoro and studied the face from behind a boulder nearby. The head was cocked to one side, eyes still open, mouth seeping moisture into the dry dirt. The eyes were the worst, staring into an infinity nobody glimpses more than once.

Goodbye, friend. We had our time, some laughs and light years. You saved my ass more than once. And now I can't do a damn thing for you.

Something moved to his right, a gossamer ball of motes. Cops, or rather, a local manifestation of them.

It flickered, spun, and said in a low, bass voice, "We regret."

"Who did this?"

"We suspect an Imperial source. Our defenses were compromised in a characteristic way. Sir."

"And what can you do?"

"I will protect you."

"You didn't do a great job for Ladoro."

"I arrived here slightly late."

"Slightly?"

"You must forgive errors. We are finite, all."

"Damn finite."

"No place is safe. This is safer, however. I extend the apologies of Madame Vissian — "

"Tell the Admiral I got his calling card."

"Sir?"

"I'M SURE YOU WILL BE ALL RIGHT," VISSIAN SAID FULSOMELY to them in the departure lounge. Zeb had to admit this woman had proven better than he had hoped. She had cleared the way, stalled the Imperial officers. Probably she shrewdly expected a payoff from him, and she had every right to do so.

"I hope I can handle a wormship," Zeb said.

"And I," Fyrna added.

"Our training is the very best," Vissian said, brow furrowing.

"I do hope you're not worried about the wild worm, Governor?"

"It's a tight fit," he said.

They had to fly in a slender cylinder, Fyrna co-piloting. Splitting the job had proved the only way to get them up to a barely competent level.

"I think it's *marvelous*, how courageous you two are."

"We have little choice," Fyrna said. This was artful understatement. Another day and the Admiral's officers would have Zeb and Fyrna under arrest, then dead.

"Riding in a little pencil ship. *Such* primitive means!"

"Uh, time to go," Zeb said behind a fixed smile. She was wearing thin again.

"*I* agree with the Emperor. Any technology distinguishable from magic is insufficiently advanced."

Zeb felt his stomach flutter with dread. "You've got a point."

HE HAD BRUSHED OFF THE REMARK. FOUR HOURS LATER, closing at high velocity with the big wormhole complex, he saw her side of it.

He spoke on suitcomm to Fyrna. "In one of my classes — Nonlinear Philosophy, I believe — the professor said something I'll never forget. 'Ideas about existence pale, beside the fact of existence.' Quite true."

"Bearing oh six nine five," she said rigorously. "No small talk."

"Nothing's small out here — except that wild worm mouth."

The wild worm was a fizzing point of vibrant agitation. It orbited the main worm mouth, a distant bright speck.

Imperial ships patrolled the main mouth, ignoring this wild worm. They had been paid off long ago, and expected a steady train of slimships to slip through the Imperial guard.

The galaxy was, after all, a collection of debris, swirling at the bottom of a gravitational pothole in the cosmos. The worms made it traversable.

Below, the planet beckoned with its lush beauties.

At the terminator, valleys sank into darkness while a chain of snowy mountains gleamed beyond. Late in the evening, just beyond the terminator, the fresh, peaked mountains glowed red-orange, like live coals. Mountaintops cleaved the sheets of clouds, leaving a wake like that of a ship. Tropical thunderheads, lit by lightning flashes at night, recalled the blooming buds of white roses.

The glories of humanity were just as striking. The shining constellations of cities at night, enmeshed by a glittering web of highways. His heart filled with pride at human accomplishments. Here the hand of his fellow Empire citizens was still casting spacious designs upon the planet's crust. They had shaped artificial seas and elliptical water basins, great squared plains of cultivated fields, immaculate order arising from once-virgin lands.

"So beautiful," he mused. "And we are fleeing for our lives from it."

Fyrna sniffed. "You are losing your taste for politics."

"You have no poetry left in your soul?"

"Only when I'm not working."

He saw distant ships begin to accelerate, their yellow exhausts flaring. "Many believe that the early Empire had been a far better affair, serene and lovely, with few conflicts and certainly fewer people."

"Fine feelings and bad history," Fyrna said, dismissing all such talk.

"No doubt you are correct. Note the Admiral's approach."

Fyrna saw them now. "Damn! They've spotted us already."

"We'll have one chance to make the worm run."

"But they know — and they'll follow."

Zeb had passed through worm gates before, but always in big cruisers plying routes through wormholes tens of meters across. Every hole of that size was the hub of a complex which buzzed with carefully orchestrated traffic. He could see the staging yards and injection corridors of the main route gleaming far away.

Their wild worm, a renegade spinoff, could vanish at any moment. Its quantum froth advertised its mortality. *And maybe ours...* Zeb thought.

"Vector null sum coming up," he called.

"Convergent asymptotes, check," Fyrna answered.

Just like the drills they had gone through.

But coming at them was a sphere fizzing orange and purple at its rim. A neon-lit mouth. Tight, dark at the very center —

Zeb felt a sudden desire to swerve, not dive into that impossibly narrow gullet.

Fyrna called numbers. Computers angled them in. He adjusted with a nudge here and a twist there.

It did not help that he knew some of the underlying physics. Wormholes were held open with onion-skin layers of negative energy, sheets of anti-pressure made in the first convulsion of the universe. The negative energy in the "struts" was equivalent to the mass needed to make a black hole of the same radius.

So they were plunging toward a region of space of unimaginable density. But the danger lurked only at the rim, where stresses could tear them into atoms.

A bull's-eye hit was perfectly safe. But an error —

Don't hit the walls...

Thrusters pulsed. The wild worm was now a black sphere rimmed in quantum fire.

Growing.

Zeb felt suddenly the helpless constriction of the pencil ship. Barely two meters across, its insulation was thin, safety buffers minimal. Behind him, Fyrna kept murmuring data and he checked...but part of him was screaming at the crushing sense of confinement, of helplessness.

He had never really liked travel all that much... A sudden swampy fear squeezed his throat.

"Vectors summing to within zero seven three," Fyrna called.

Her voice was calm, steady, a marvelous balm. He clung to its serene certainties and fought down his own panic.

"Let's have your calculation," she called.

He was behind! Musing, he had lost track.

With a moment's hard thought he could make his mind bicameral. The two liberated subselves did their tasks, speaking back and forth only if they wished. The results merged when each was done.

"There." He squirted her the answers, last moment computations of the changing tidal stresses into which they now plunged.

Squeals of last-second correction echoed in his cramped chamber. A quick kick in the pants —

Lightning curling snakelike blue and gold at them —

— tumbling. Out the other end, in a worm complex fifteen thousand light years away.

"That old professor...damn right, he was," he said.

Fyrna sighed, her only sign of stress. "Ideas about existence pale...beside the fact of existence. Yes, my love. Living is bigger than any talk about it."

A YELLOW-GREEN SUN GREETED THEM. AND SOON ENOUGH, AN Imperial picket craft. The Admiral had been right behind them and he had called ahead somehow.

So they ducked and ran. A quick swerve, and they angled into the traffic-train headed for a large wormhole mouth. The commercial charge-computers accepted his Imperial override without a murmur. Zeb had learned well. Fyrna corrected him if he got mixed up.

Their second hyperspace jump took a mere three minutes. They popped out far from a dim red dwarf.

By the fourth jump they knew the drill. Having the code-status of the Imperial court banished objections.

But being on the run meant that they had to take whatever wormhole mouths they could get. Kafalan's people could not be too far behind.

A wormhole could take traffic only one way at a time. High velocity ships plowed down the wormhole throats, which could vary from a finger's length to a star's diameter.

Zeb had known the numbers, of course. There were a few billion wormholes in the galactic disk, spread among several hundred billion stars. The average Imperial Sector was about fifty light years in radius. A jump could bring you out still many years from a far-flung world.

This influenced planetary development. Some verdant planets were green fortresses against an isolation quite profound. For them the Empire was a remote dream, the source of exotic products and odd ideas.

The worm web had many openings near inhabitable worlds, but also many near mysteriously useless solar systems. By brute force interstellar hauling the Empire had positioned the smaller worm mouths — those massing perhaps as much as a mountain range — near rich planets. But some worm mouths of gargantuan mass orbited near solar systems as barren and pointless as any surveyed.

Was this random, or a network left by some earlier civilization? Archeologists thought so. Certainly the wormholes themselves were leftovers from the Great Emergence, when space and time alike began. They linked distant realms which had once been nearby, when the galaxy was young and smaller. The differential churn of the disk had redistributed the wormholes. But someone — or rather, something©©had made sure they at least orbited reasonably near a star.

They developed a rhythm. Pop though a worm mouth, make comm contact, get in line for the next departure. Imperial watchdogs would not pull anyone of high class from a queue. So their most dangerous moments came as they negotiated clearance.

At this Fyrna became adept. She sent the WormMaster computers blurts of data and — *whisk* — they were edging into orbital vectors, bound for their next jump.

They caught a glimpse of Admiral Kafalan's baroque ship winking forth from a wormhole mouth they had left only minutes before. In the scurry©scurry of commerce they lost themselves, while they waited their turn. Then they ducked through their next hole, a minor

mouth, hoping Kafalan had not noticed.

For once, the snaky, shiny innards of the worm was almost relaxing to Zeb. This one was small of mouth but long of throat; their journey took dragging, heart©thumping moments.

Matter could flow only one way at a time in a wormhole. The few experiments with simultaneous two-way transport ended in disaster. No matter how ingenious engineers tried to steer ships around each other, the sheer flexibility of worm-tunnels spelled doom. Each worm mouth kept the other "informed" of what it had just eaten. This information flowed as a wave, not in physical matter, but in the tension of the wormhole itself — a ripple in the "stress tensor," as physicists termed it.

Flying ships through both mouths sent stress waves propagating toward each other, at speeds which depended on the location and velocity of the ships. The stress constricted the throat, so that when the waves met, a clenching squeezed down the walls.

The essential point was that the two waves moved differently after they met. They interacted, one slowing and the other speeding up, in highly nonlinear fashion.

One wave could grow, the other shrink. The big one made the throat clench down into sausages. When a sausage neck met a ship, the craft *might* slip through — but calculating that was a prodigious job. If the sausage neck happened to meet the two ships when they-passed — *crunch.*

This was no mere technical problem. It was a real limitation, imposed by the laws of quantum gravity. From that firm fact arose an elaborate system of safeguards, taxes, regulators and hangers-on — all the apparatus of a bureaucracy which does indeed have a purpose, and makes the most of it.

Zeb learned to dispel his apprehension by watching the views. Suns and planets of great, luminous beauty floated in the blackness.

Behind the resplendence, he knew, lurked necessity.

From the wormhole calculus arose blunt economic facts. Between worlds A and B there might be half a dozen wormhole jumps — the Nest was not simply connected, a mere astrophysical subway system. Each worm mouth imposed added fees and charges on each shipment.

Control of an entire trade route yielded the maximum profit. The struggle for control was unending, often violent. From the viewpoint of economics, politics and "historical momentum" — which meant a sort of imposed inertia on events — a local empire which controlled a whole constellation of nodes should be solid, enduring.

Not so. Time and again, regional satrapies went toes-up. As Governor, he had been forced to bail some of them out. That amounted to local politics, where he had proved reasonably adept. Alas, Kafalan pursued them for global, galactic reasons.

Many worlds that feasted on the largesse of a wormhole mouth perished, or at least suffered repeated boom-and-bust cycles, because they were elaborately controlled. It seemed natural to squeeze every worm passage for the maximum fee, by coordinating every worm mouth to optimize traffic. But that degree of control made people restive.

The system could not deliver the best benefits. Over-control failed.

On their seventeenth jump, they met a case in point.

"VECTOR ASIDE FOR SEARCH," CAME AN AUTOMATIC COMMAND from an Imperial vessel. They had no choice. The big-bellied Imperial sentry craft scooped them up within seconds after their emergence from a medium-sized wormhole mouth.

"Transgression tax," a computerized system announced. "Planet Alacaran demands that special carriers pay — " A blur of computer language.

"Let's pay it," Zeb said.

"I wonder if it will provide a tracer for Kafalan's use," Fyrna said over comm.

"What is our option?"

"I shall use my own personal indices."

"For a wormhole transit? That will bankrupt you!"

"It is safer."

Zeb fumed while they floated in magnetic grapplers beneath the Imperial picket ship. The wormhole orbited a heavily industrialized world. Gray cities sprawled over the continents and webbed across the seas in huge hexagonals.

The Empire had two planetary modes: rural and urban. Farm worlds were socially stable because of its time-honored lineages and stable economic modes. They, and the similar Femo-rustics, lasted.

This planet Alacaran, on the other hand, seemed to cater to the other basic human impulse: clumping, seeking the rub of one's fellows, a pinnacle of city-clustering.

Zeb had always thought it odd that humanity broke so easily into two modes. Now, though, his political experience clarified these proclivities. Most people were truly primates, seeking a leader. Countless planets congealed into the same basic Feudalist attractor groups — Macho, Socialist, Paternal. Even the odd Thantocracies fit the pattern. They had Pharaoh-figures promising admission to an afterlife, and detailed rankings descending from his exalted peak in the rigid social pyramid.

"They're paid off," Fyrna sent over comm. "Such corruption!"

"Ummm, yes, shocking." Was he getting cynical? He wanted to turn and speak with her, but their pencil ship allowed scant socializing.

"Let's go."

"Where to?"

"To..." He realized that he had no idea.

"We have probably eluded pursuit," Fyrna voice came through stiff and tight. He had learned to recognize these signs of her own tension.

"We could work a route back to our Sector."

"They would expect that and block it."

He felt a stab of disappointment. But she was the professional bodyguard and she was undoubtedly right. "Where, then?"

"I took advantage of this pause to alert a friend, by wormlink," she said. "We may be able to return, though through a devious route."

"The Speculists — "

"May not expect such audacity."

"Which recommends the idea."

DIZZYING INDEED — LEAPING ABOUT THE ENTIRE GALAXY, trapped in a casket-sized container. They jumped and dodged and jumped again. At several more wormhole yards Fyrna made "deals". Payoffs, actually. She deftly dealt combinations of his cygnets, the Imperial Passage indices, and her private numbers.

"Costly," Zeb fretted. "How will I ever pay — "

"The dead do not worry about debts," she said.

"You have such an engaging way of putting matters."

"Subtlety is wasted here."

They emerged from one jump in close orbit about a sublimely tortured star. Streamers lush with light raced by them.

"How long can this worm last here?" he wondered.

"It will be rescued, I'm sure. Imagine the chaos in the system if a worm mouth begins to gush hot plasma."

Zeb knew the wormhole system, though discovered in pre-Empire ages, had not always been used. After the underlying physics of the wormhole calculus came to be known, ships could ply the galaxy by invoking wormhole states around themselves. This afforded exploration of reaches devoid of wormholes, but at high energy costs and some danger. Further, such ship©local hyperdrives were far slower than simply slipping through a worm.

And if the Empire eroded? Lost the worm network? Would the slim attack fighters and snakelike weapons fleets give way to lumbering hypership dreadnoughts?

The next destination swam amid an eerie black void, far out in the halo of red dwarfs above the galactic plane. The disk stretched in luminous splendor. Zeb remembered holding a coin and thinking of how a mere speck on it stood for a vast volume, *like* a large Zone. Here such human terms seemed pointless. The galaxy was one serene entity, grander than any human perspective.

"Ravishing," Fyrna said.

"See Andromeda? It looks nearly as close."

The spiral, twin to their own galaxy, hung above them. Its lanes of clotted dust framed stars azure and crimson and emerald. A slow

THERE ARE PLENTY OF WAYS TO KILL A WORLD. OR A MAN, HE REFLECTED.

symphony of mass and time.

"Here comes our connection," Zeb warned.

This wormhole intersection afforded five branches. Three black spheres orbited closely together like circling leopards, blaring bright by their quantum rim radiation. Two cubic wormholes circled further out. Zeb knew that one of the rare variant forms was cubical, but he had never seen any. Two together suggested that they were born at the edge of galaxies, but such matters were beyond his shaky understanding.

"We go — there," Fyrna pointed a laser beam at one of the cubes, guiding the pencil ship.

They thrust toward the smaller cube, gingerly inching up. The wormyard here was automatic and no one hailed them.

"Tight fit," Zeb said nervously.

"Five fingers to spare."

He thought she was joking, then realized that if anything, she was underestimating the fit. At this less-used wormhole intersection slow speeds were essential. Good physics, unfortunate economics. The slow-down cut the net flux of mass, making them backwater intersections.

He gazed at Andromeda to take his mind off the piloting. No wormholes emerged in other galaxies, for arcane reasons of quantum gravity. Or perhaps by some ancient alien design?

They flew directly into a flat face of a cubic worm. The negative-energy-density struts which held the wormhole open were in the edges, so the faces were free of tidal forces.

A smooth ride took them quickly to several wormyards in close orbit about planets. One Zeb recognized as a rare type with an old but ruined biosphere. There are plenty of ways to kill a world. Or a man, he reflected.

Another jump — into the working zone of a true, natural black hole. He watched the enormous energy-harvesting disks glow with fermenting scarlets and virulent purples. The Empire had stationed great conduits of magnetic field around the hole. These sucked and drew interstellar dust clouds. The dark cyclones narrowed toward the brilliant accretion disk around the hole. Radiation from the friction and infalling of that great disk was in turn captured by vast grids and reflectors.

The crop of raw photon energy itself became trapped and flushed into the waiting maws of wormholes. These carried the flux to distant worlds in need of cutting lances of light, for the business of planet-shaping, world-raking, moon-carving.

"Time to run," she said.

"We can't get back to our home Sector?"

"I have eavesdropped on the signals sent between worm sites. We are wanted at all domains adjacent to our Sector."

"Damn."

"I suspect they have many allies."

"They must, to get this quick cooperation. They've staged a fine little manhunt."

"Perhaps the nova trigger issue is but a pretext?"

"How so?"

"Many like the present system of wormhole use," she said delicately. She never let her own views of politics seep into their relationship. Even this oblique reference plainly made her uncomfortable. Her concern was him as a breathing man, not as a bundle of political abstractions.

She had a point, too. Zeb wanted free wormholes, governed only by market forces. The Speculists wanted tarrifs and favors, preferences and paybacks. And guess who would control all that bureaucracy?

He floated and thought. She wanted for the decision.

"Precious little running room left."

"I do not urge compromise. I merely advise."

"Ladoro..."

"They would not have bothered to kill him unless they wanted to deal."

"I don't like dealing with a knife at my throat."

"We need to decide," she said edgily.

Time ran against them. He bit his lip. Give up? He couldn't, even if it seemed smart.

"Our Sector is pretty far out. What if we run inward?"

"To what end?"

"I'll be working on that. Let's go."

PELLUCID, A MERE DOZEN LIGHT YEARS FROM GALACTIC Center, had seventeen wormhole mouths orbiting within its solar system — the highest hole density in the galaxy. The system had originally held only two, but a gargantuan technology of brute interstellar flight had tugged the rest there, to make the nexus.

Each of the seventeen spawned occasional wild worms. One of these was Fyrna's target.

But to reach it, they had to venture where few did.

"The galactic center is dangerous," Fyrna said as they coasted toward the decisive wormhole mouth. They curved above a barren mining planet. "But necessary."

"The Admiral pursuing us worries me more — " Their jump cut him off.

— and the spectacle silenced him.

The filaments were so large the eye could not take them in. They stretched fore and aft, shot through with immense luminous corridors and dusky lanes. These arches yawned over tens of light years. Immense curves descended toward the white©hot True Center. There matter frothed and fumed and burst into dazzling fountains.

"The black hole," he said simply.

The small black hole they had seen only an hour before had trapped a few stellar masses. At True Center, three million suns had died to feed gravity's gullet.

The orderly arrays of radiance were thin, only a light year across. Yet they sustained themselves along hundreds of light years as they churned with change. Zeb switched the polarized walls to see in different frequency ranges. Though hot and roiling in the visible, human spectrum, the radio revealed hidden intricacy. Threads laced among convoluted spindles. He had a powerful impression of layers, of labyrinthine order ascending beyond his view, beyond simple understanding.

"Particle flux is high," Fyrna said tensely. "And rising."

"Where's our junction?"

"I'm having trouble vector-fixing — ah! There."

Hard acceleration rammed him back into his flow-couch. Fyrna took them diving down into a mottled pyramid-shaped wormhole.

This was an even rarer geometry. Zeb had time to marvel at how accidents of the universal birth-pang had shaped these serene geometries, like exhibits in some god's Euclidean museum of the mind.

The wild worm they had used fizzed and glowed behind them. Something emerged on their tail.

Fyrna sped them toward a ramshackle, temporary wormyard. He said nothing, but felt her tense calculations.

The sky filled with light.

HERE STARS WERE RIPPED OPEN, SPILLED, SMELTED DOWN INTO FUSING GLOBS. THEY LIT UP THE DARK, OR BITING MASSES OF DEBRIS LIKE TINY CRIMSON MATCH HEADS FLARING IN A FILTHY COAL SACK.

"They have detonated the worm!" Fyrna cried.

Braking hard, veering left —

— into a debris cloud. Thumps, crashes.

Zeb said, "How could the Admiral blow a *worm?*"

"He carries considerable weaponry. Evidently the Empire knows how to trigger the negative-energy-density struts inside a worm mouth."

"Can they see us?"

"Not inside this cloud — I hope."

"Head for that bigger cloud — there."

A huge blot beckoned, coal-sack sullen. They were close in here, near the hole's accretion disk. Around them churned the deaths of stars, all orchestrated by the magnetic filaments.

Here stars were ripped open, spilled, smelted down into fusing globs. They lit up the dark, orbiting masses of debris like tiny crimson match heads flaring in a filthy coal sack.

Amid all that moved the strangest stars of all. Each was half-covered by a hanging hemispherical mask. The mask gave off infrared from this strange screen, which hung at a fixed distance from the star. It hovered on light, gravity just balancing the outward light pressure. The mask reflected half the star's flux back on it, turning up the heat on the cooker, sending virulent arcs jetting from the corona.

Light escaped freely on one side while the mask bottled it up on the other. This pushed the star toward the mask, but the mask was bound to the star by gravitation. It adjusted and kept the right distance. The forlorn star was able to eject light in only one direction, so it recoiled oppositely.

The filaments were herding these stars: sluggish, but effective. Herded toward the accretion disk, stoking the black hole's appetite.

"The Admiral is after us."

Zeb could see nothing, but she had the instruments to peer through the dust cloaking them. "Can he shoot?"

"Not if we damp engines."

"Do it."

Drifting...into a narrow gulf, overlooking the splendor below.

Blackness dwelled at the core, but friction heated the infalling gas and dust. These brimmed with forced radiation. Storms worried the great banks; white-hot tornadoes whirled. A virulent glow hammered outward, shoving incessantly at the crowded masses jostling in their doomed orbits. Gravity's gullet forced the streams into a disk, churning ever inward.

Amid this deadly torrent, life persisted. Of a sort.

Zeb peered through the gaudy view, seeking the machine-beasts who ate and dwelled and died here.

Suffering the press of hot photons, the grazer waited. To these photovores, the great grinding disk was a source of food. Above the searing accretion disk, in hovering clouds, gossamer herds fed.

"Vector that way," Zeb said. "I remember seeing these on my visit..."

"We run a risk, using our drive."

"So be it."

Sheets of the photovores billowed in the electromagnetic winds, basking in the sting. Some were tuned to soak up particular slices of the electromagnetic spectrum, each species with a characteristic polish and shape, deploying great flat receptor planes to maintain orbit and angle in the eternal brimming day.

Their ship slipped among great wings of high-gloss moly-sheet spread. The photovore herds skated on winds and magnetic torques in a complex dynamical sum. They were machines, of course, descended from robot craft which had explored this center billions of years before. More complex machines, evolved in this richness, prowled the darker lanes further out.

"Let's hide here."

"We're over©heating already," she said.

"Duck into the shade of that big-winged one."

She called, "Our own ship magnetic fields are barely able to hold back the proton hail."

"Where's the nearest worm?"

"Not far, but — "

"The Admiral will be covering it."

"Of course." A chess game with obvious moves.

A bolt seared across the dust ball behind them and struck some photovores. They burst open and flared with fatal energies.

"He's shooting on spec," Zeb said.

"Perhaps he does not like the weather here."

They hugged the shadow and waited. Moments tiptoed by.

The Admiral's ship emerged from a dust bank, baroquely elegant and foppishly ornate, glowing with purpose, spiraling lazily down.

Zeb saw a spindly radiance below the photovore sheets. "A magnetic filament."

"Looks dangerous," she said.

"Let's head for it."

"What?"

"We're doomed if we stay here. If you're losing at a game, change the game."

They slipped below vast sheets of photovores with out-stretched wings, banking gracefully on the photon breeze. Lenses swiveled to follow the human ship: prey? Here a pack of photovores had clumped, caught in a magnetic flux tube that eased down along the axis of the galaxy itself.

Among them glided steel-blue gamma-vores, feeders on the harder gamma-ray emission from the accretion disk. They sometimes came this far up, he knew, perhaps to hunt the silicate-creatures who dwelled in the darker dust clouds. Much of the ecology here was still unknown.

He stopped musing. Nature red in tooth and claw, after all. Time to move. Where?

"Slip into the magnetic tube."

She said sharply, "But the electrodynamic potentials there — "

"Let's draw a little cover."

She swooped them forward toward the filament. This also took them angling toward a huge sailcraft photovore. It sighted them, pursued.

Here navigation was simple. Far below them, the rotational pole of the Eater of All Things, the black hole of three million stellar masses, was a pinprick of absolute black at the center of a slowly revolving, incandescent disk.

The photovore descended after them, through thin planes of burnt-gold light seekers. They all lived to ingest light and excrete microwave beams, placid conduits, but some — like the one gliding after the tiny human ship — had developed a taste for metals: a metallovore. It folded its mirror wings, now angular and swift, accelerating.

"The Admiral has noticed us," she announced in flat tones.

"Good. Into the flux tube. Quick!"

"That big alien machine is going to reach us first."

"Even better."

He had heard the lecture, while on his "tour" here. Fusion fires inside the photovores could digest the ruined carcasses of other

Continued on page 95

The U.S. Government continues
to deny knowledge of any contact between
Earth and extraterrestrial lifeforms.

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By Eric T. Baker

Christopher Walken and John Hurt bring *Privateer 2: The Darkening* to life.

ABOVE: *The star-studded* Privateer 2 *brings out the intergalactic wheeler dealer in all of us.* BELOW: *In order to survive, you'll need to earn the most powerful weaponry the future holds.*

IN *PRIVATEER 2: THE DARKENING* (ORIGIN & ELECtronic Arts) video cut scenes alternate with 3D space fighter combat in a complicated plot of discovery, commerce, and death. High production values and an all-star cast in the video (Clive Owen, John Hurt, Jurgen Prochnow, David Warner, & Christopher Walken)are matched by a clean and detailed simulation in the fighter combat. Despite its name, *Privateer 2: The Darkening* is not really a sequel to the 1993 Origin game *Privateer.* The original *Privateer* was a spin off of Origin's best selling *Wing Commander* series and set in the *Wing Commander* universe. *Privateer 2* is set in its own universe, The Tri-System, and shares nothing with the first *Privateer* except a basic concept: that characters are free agent fighter pilots who must earn their way either in commerce or free-lance missions.

On top of the basic concept of *P2* is an uber plot. Lev Arris (played with deadpan doggedness by Clive Owen) wakens in a hospital on the planet Crius, the only survivor of a space ship crash. Arris survived because he was in a cryopod. As a side effect of the cryogenic suspension, Arris has lost his memory. Someone must remember him, however, because our hero has hardly gotten to his feet before two sets of assassins arrive at the hospital and knock him out again. When he awakens this time, Arris is on Hermes, and, with no other options on the horizon, decides to take Joe the Bartender's (John Hurt's) advice and become a privateer.

So much for the opening video sequence. From *this* point the game falls into the routine that will be familiar to anyone who has played the latest releases of *Wing Commander.* After each video cut scene, the player buys and equips a fighter, hires a freighter to escort, or accepts a mission for a promised reward, travels to another star system, fights whoever gets in his way, lands at his destination, collects his profits or reward, and (if he has gone to the correct destination to advance the plot) is rewarded with another video cut scene. And so on. Equip, fly, fight, collect, video, repeat.

It will give you some idea of the work that went into this game to know that there are three hours of live action video on the three CD ROMs included in the package. The uber plot to restore Arris' memory requires 25 cut scenes, and there are twelve subplots that all have cut scenes of their own. Jurgen Prochnow (the captain from *Das Boot*) appears in one of the larger of these subplots. The game map contain over two hundred jump points including eight major planets, plus minor planets and space stations. Obviously, the game provides a lot of hours of playing time for its $65 price tag. The bad news is that most of those hours of playing time are going to be spent fighting other ships.

To get from planet to planet in *P2*, you travel from jump point to jump point. This is a simple matter of plotting your course on a pop up map, and then hitting J on your keyboard. What quickly becomes frustrating, however, is that you cannot jump if there are hostile ships in the jump zone with you. If there are, you have no choice but to kill them before you proceed. You can't talk to them, you can't run from them. You can only fight them until they or you are gone. And most of the time you have no idea who they are. The game contains 56 ships, any one of which might be controlled by one of the planetary governments or one of the three pirate clans as it chases you around the jump point, forbidding you from getting on with the story.

The combat program itself is very good. Your ship flies with your joystick or mouse. You need the key board to control speed and missiles, but since you usually fly with the throttle wide and since your missile will probably be gone after the first fight (even the heaviest fighters carry only six) most of the fighting is done with one hand. The ships are beautifully rendered in polygons and all the effects from the *lighting to* the laser bursts are gorgeous. There is no cockpit background to clutter the screen, as most of instrument readouts fade from view when not in use. Killing the

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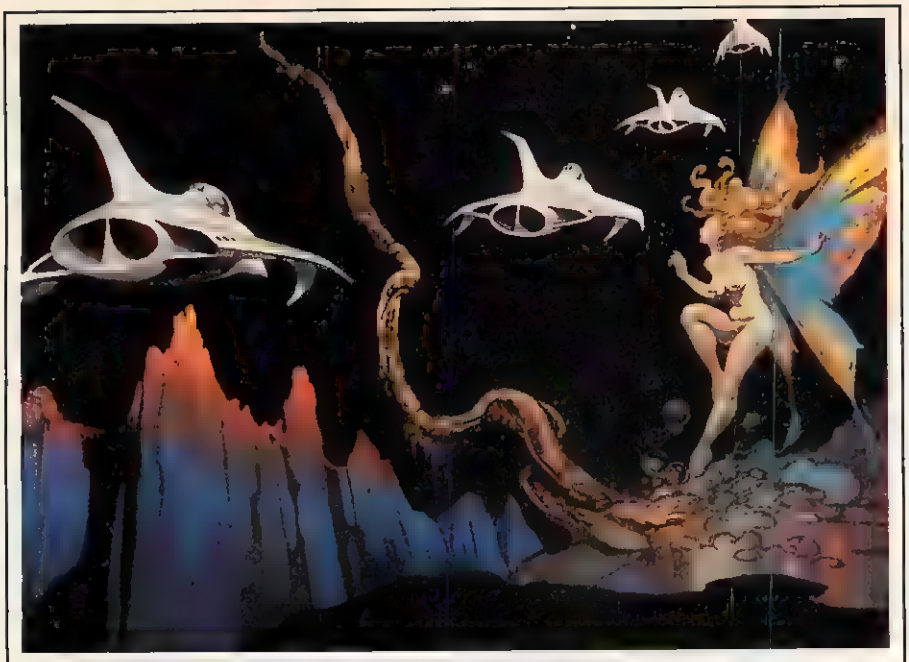

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other ships becomes a simple matter of keeping your bulls-eye on them and lasing away. And lasing away. And lasing. And ....

One of the points of adding the economic portion of the game to the fighting part of the game is so that the player can earn money to buy bigger, better, faster, deadly fighters armed with bigger, better, deadlier weapons. Also he can afford better wing men to watch his tail and bigger cargo ships (more guns of their own) to haul his commodities (and help watch his tail). In most games getting better makes the player safer from the low level threats and ready him for the high level ones. In *P2* the player can get better equipment, but the game's AI sets the level of the random encounters at the jump point based on the strength of the player's ships. Thus, no matter hard he works and no matter how much money he makes, the player is always going to be at a disadvantage in the battles around the jump gates. And he has to win the battles to jump. And he has to jump to solve the uber plot. Lots and lots of hours of lasing away at enemy ships that you can't run away from or talk to or get help with.

Like combat, the planet bound bookkeeping is as visually stunning as it is mechanically repetitive. Artists, designers, and animators did a terrific job of creating unique and interesting and beautiful background and animation for all of the many planet and station based destinations that Arris wanders in search of his lost identity. Each planet has its own way of moving Arris from one site to another and they are all imaginative and interesting to watch. If there is a complaint to be made, it is that for all the multitude of planets and stations in the Tri-System Universe, you get to see only a tiny part of their surfaces. Some of the major planets have three sites for Arris to visit, but most have only two: a customs area to take care of the ships and commodities, and a bar to activate the video cut scene. It is as if all the variety of Earth had been reduced to Grand Central Station and the Paris Hard Rock Cafe. It's hard not to think that the game might have been improved if more things had been staged to happen on fewer planets so that less time has to be spent fighting back and forth across space.

On a dollar per hour basis, *Privateer 2: The Darkening* is clearly a good value. The beauty of its art, animations, and 3D renderings cannot be overstated. It is easy to learn and easy to play. The idea of allowing players to control their own destiny (and bank account) rather than being assigned missions on the game's whim is a good one. The video sequences are entertaining and the space fighter dog fighting is fun. If you just didn't have to do so much of the latter to get to watch the former.

Overall, *P2* is mostly a dog fight game, and if you are a fan of such, then you will get your money's worth. If not, you are probably better to pass and spend the money at your local video store for a movie that doesn't take so much work to watch. □

BOOKS

Continued from page 18

ship, my eyes glazed over and my heart sank, remaining sunk until I reached the last page.

The plot of *Jovah's Angel* centers on Alleya's reluctant term as Archangel, during which she must mediate between the Menadavvi and the Edori, postpone a trade war, prevent violent weather from destroying much of Samara and oh, yes, find the mate Jovah has designated for her. There are *side*-trips involving Caleb, who has invented a fuel-driven vehicle; Delilah, a fallen angel who was Alleya's predecessor as Archangel; and Noah, an Edori who falls for Delilah. The former Arch-angel loses her lover and her ability to fly in the book's opening pages, which makes her a little difficult sometimes, but understandably so. All of the characters, including the snappish Delilah (who moonlights as a seraphic cabaret singer), are unfailingly decent. In Samaria, people are respected for their differences, and even the mendacious Menadavvi appear to be reluctant villains.

This is secular humanist science fiction, and while one applauds Shinn's innate seemliness, one also longs for something *really bad to happen* — like Milton's Devil standing Abash'd, and feeling how awful goodness is. It's page 226 before anything really yucky occurs — a tornado, and a very well-drawn tornado it is: if only Shinn had turned her talent to imbuing some human or angelic figure with that storm's demonic energy! Instead, *Jovah's Angel* consists of nearly 400 pages of nice people during their best against not quite insurmountable odds in a pretty okay place to live. As Tolkien wrote in *The Hobbit*, "things that are good to have and days that are good to spend are soon told about, and not much to listen to." Angels, oracles, gods in machines: these are the stuff of countless novels, from John Crowley's *Engine Summer* to Gene Wolfe's *Long Sun* sequence, Nancy Willard's *Sister Water* to Paul Witcover's recent *Waking Beauty*. And while it may not be necessary for angels to have cloven feet in order to evoke some sense of drama, it certainly doesn't hurt.

Shakespeare's King Henry V remarked, "There is some soul of goodness in things evil, Would men observingly distill it out." Some soul of evil within the ranks of Jovah's seraphim might well have redeemed them from the sins of earnestness and tedium, and made Shinn's angels dance upon the head of a pin, rather than lie desultorily upon the peaks of Mount Sinai. The road to Hell may well be paved with good intentions; in this case, it just leads to Aw, Heck.

Elizabeth Hand

RECENT & RECOMMENDED

If you have never read Damon Knight's *In Search of Wonder* (Advent Publishers, hardcover, 402 pages, $20.00), you are in for a miraculous discovery, for coming upon it for the first time is like coming face to face with the Holy Grail. To read this volume is to have one's thoughts about SF crystallize, as if listening to the secret truth of science fiction.

And now, a new generation of readers can have even more of a treat, for Advent Press has just released a third edition, one so expanded and revised — with over 30,000 additional words — that it is a must even for those who own either (or both) of the first two. Knight, who was the founder and first president of the Science Fiction Writers of America as well as the founder of the Milford Science Fiction Writers' Conference, practically invented the modern art of SF book reviewing, replacing fawning pablum with cogent criticism. "I was trying to pay science fiction the compliment of taking it seriously, something that had never been done in any extended way within the field before," wrote Knight. "Up to this point, our admiration for science fiction had been indiscriminate; we liked some things more than others, but we liked everything. To criticize science fiction severely would have been to risk allying ourselves with the outside critics who scorned it." Knight, named a Grandmaster by SFWA in '95, taught us a valuable lesson back then, one that is still worth remembering.

Robert Heinlein invented the term "speculative fiction," but Forrest J. Ackerman coined the phrase "sci-fi," and we all know which one stuck. Whatever the controversies surrounding that appellation, Ackerman's influence on the field cannot be denied. He contributed to the first SF fanzine, started an SF club in 1929, edited and published Ray Bradbury's first story in 1938, and edited the seminal movie magazine *Famous Monsters of Filmland* for many years. His home in Hollywood Hills — dubbed the "Ackermansion" — has 18 rooms packed with over 300,000 pieces of movie memorabilia. And now he has gathered together 65 of his favorite short stories in *Ackermanthology!* (General Publishing Group, trade paperback, 304 pages, $12.95), including such authors as Richard Wilson, Jerome Bixby, and Isaac Asimov and many others. Ackerman himself is also included as an author, with a piece titled "The Shortest SF Story Ever Told." The cosmic cover is by Kelly Freas, and director John Landis has written a foreword. As Stephen King has written of Ackerman, "Forry was the first; he *was* the best and he *is* the best." □

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GROUNDLING DANCER

Continued from page 42

examination, including an ultrascan of his wings, nubs, and back.

Later in the afternoon, seated at his desk, the Chief Medtech just shook his head, chuckling wryly, before reviewing the results with Mikel and Aylin.

"See here, this is your original ultrascan," the Chief said. "Your wing nubs actually contained another set of wing buds. These tiny shadows, right here. See? We just missed them, never suspected they were there." He pointed at the old scan, shaking his head. "You are a unique case, Mikel. But we think your wing loss and regrowth is analogous to losing baby teeth, then eventually growing adult teeth back." Then he tapped the new scan that contained no shadowy hidden buds in the wing nubs. "But, like adult teeth, these will be your last set of wings."

LATER, LEAVING THE MEDCENTER, AYLIN said, "Mikel, you are really fortunate, you know?" He nodded, not sure how he really felt. Mikel knew he should be thankful for the regrowth of his wings, get back to work at the stone quarry, re-establish his old routine, and forget the circus. But he couldn't go back to work yet, and he couldn't help trying to revisit the past.

Early the next morning he returned to the village square, trying to practice his old exercise routines around the hummerpad...But it was no use. He wasn't able to leap, bound, or even run. The strength and agility were gone. He was just like all the other villagers, able to do only a little more than hop around on his legs and feet, like a bird.

As the days passed, his wings grew stronger, his legs even weaker; and Mikel couldn't help daydreaming of his time in the spotlight at the aerial circus. He spent less and less time in the village, the villagers plain brown wings and facial guild tats only reminding him how far away he was from the City of Towers and the Aerial Circus. He even avoided his friends. And he didn't feel ready to return to work, not quite yet. Instead, he flexed and exercised his new wings, flying on the early morning updrafts, but brooding on the sudden and ironic turn of fate, growing more depressed as the days passed.

THEN, TWO WEEKS OR SO AFTER RETURNing home, Mikel received a holo-gram from the City of Towers. Holding the cube in hand he clicked it on, and watched a shimmering image coalesce into familiar clarity. It was Taj.

"Greetings, Mikel," she said, smiling kind of shyly. "I tried to call, but you were always out, so I sent the 'gram. We all miss you here at the Circus. I'm working again with the aerial dancers, and it's going well, but...you know. It's not quite the same as our work together, which I will always remember as a very special time. We did something quite extraordinary, I think. Anyhow, the maestro asked me to tell you that twenty tickets will be available for you, family, and friends at Will Call, when we play Seaside next Sunday night. Hope to see you then." Her image faded abruptly.

The circus here this Sunday?

It was only five days away.

He felt excited, choked up, just thinking about it. Then Mikel remembered, he would be going only as a spectator, and the thought saddened him.

Thursday morning Aylin flew with him. "Mikel, something isn't right," she said, after gliding next to him for a few minutes. "You haven't returned to work. You seem unhappy, to be brooding about something. Can you tell me what is wrong?"

He nodded.

Then they were suddenly pushed up about fifty feet higher, where they hung suspended like a pair of kites, as Mikel tried to explain his feelings.

"The old groundling race was real," he began. "They didn't have wings, but moved on their legs. They developed dance to a high art form. It was an important part of their culture." He paused, searching for the words. "Dance is very important to me, too. In the performance dome in the City of Towers, I felt...real, natural, in my element, doing something important." He held up his hand, as they hovered, to prevent her interrupting and continued, "I need to finish this now, Aylin, explain what I've lost." He took a deep breath, and said, "When I was on...after a few performances, not at the end. But when I was good, I felt like an extension of the music. It was like I was exposing some important inner part of myself. Like I bared my soul, and the audiences responded to this. It was exactly right. Even without wings, I was still something special, something more than a stonecutter. I was a groundling dancer, the only one left, last of a kind, a link with the past." He stopped and reached out and held her hand, as they hung suspended in space and time. "Do you understand me, how I feel? What I've lost. Even though I love you, I belong with the Circus, Aylin. Here, I'm just a freak, a groundling with wings."

A gust suddenly pushed them a few feet apart.

Aylin glided silently for a few moments, looked at him directly, then she shifted her wings, and dove away, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

MIKEL AWAKENED BEFORE DAWN, RISing carefully so as not to disturb Aylin. Then he tip-toed into the bathroom. He had made a decision. Sucking in a deep breath, he steeled himself and withdrew the laser scalpel from his wife's medkit... □

GALAXIA

Continued from page 89

machines. Exquisitely tuned, their innards yielded pure ingots of any alloy desired.

The ultimate resources here were mass and light. The photovores lived for light, and the sleek metallovore lived to eat them, or even better, the human ship, an exotic variant. It now gave gigahertz cries of joy as it followed them into the magnetic fields of the filament.

"These magnetic entities are intelligent?" she asked.

"Yes, though not in the sense we short-term *think*ers recognize. They are more like fitfully sleeping libraries." A glimmer of an idea. "But it's their thinking processes that might save us."

"How?"

"They trigger their thinking with electrodynamic potentials. We're irritating them, I'm sure, by flying in hell-bent like this."

"How wonderful."

"Watch that metallovore. Let it get close, then evade it."

Banks, swoops, all amid radiance. Magnetic strands glowed like ivory.

It would ingest them with relish, but the metal-seeker could not maneuver as swiftly as their sleek ship. Deftly they zoomed through magnetic entrails — and the Admiral followed.

"How soon will these magnetic beings react?"

Zeb shrugged. "Soon, if experience is a guide."

"And we — "

"Hug the metallovore now. Quick!"

"But don't let him grab us?"

"That's the idea."

The metallovore, too, was part of an intricate balance. Without it, the ancient community orbiting the Eater would decay to a less diverse state, one of monotonous simplicity, unable to adjust to the Eater's vagaries. Less energy would be harnessed, less mass recovered.

The metallovore skirted over them. Zeb gazed out at it. Predators always had parasites, scavengers. Here and there on the metallovore's polished skin were limpets and barnacles, lumps of orange©brown and soiled yellow that fed on chance debris, purging the metallovore of unwanted elements — wreckage and dust which can jam even the most robust mechanisms, given time.

It banked, trying to reach them. The Admiral's glossy ship came angling in, too, along the magnetic strands.

"Let it get closer," Zeb ordered.

"It'll grab us!"

"True, unless the Admiral kills it first."

"Some choice," she said sardonically.

A dance to the pressure of photons. Light was the fluid here, spilling up from the blistering storms far below in the great grinding disk. This rich harvest supported the great sphere which stretched for hundreds of cubic light years, its sectors and spans like armatures of an unimaginable city. Why had he gone into politics, Zeb asked himself — he was always rather abstract when in a crisis — when all *this* beckoned?

All this, centered on a core of black oblivion, the dark font of vast wealth.

"I'm getting a lot of electrodynamic static," she called.

"Ah, good."

"Good? My instruments are sluggish — "

The metallovore loomed. Pincers flexed forth from it. The jolt came first as a small refraction in the howling' virulence. Slow lightning arced along the magnetic filament, annihilation riding down.

"It'll fry us!"

"Not us," he said. "We're a minor mote here. Much bigger conductors will draw this fire."

Another jarring jolt. The metallovore arced and writhed and died in a dancing fire.

No differently could the laws of electrodynamics treat an ever bigger conductor, closing in. The Admiral's fine glowing ship drew flashes of discharge, dancing ruby-red and bile-green.

It coasted, dead. The larger surface areas of both metallovore and starship had intercepted the electrical circuitry of the filaments.

"I...you really did know what you were doing," she said weakly.

"Not actually. I was just following my intuition."

"The one that got you the Governorship?"

"No, something more primitive."

Coasting now, out of the gossamer filaments. There might be more bolts of high voltage.

"Is everyone on that ship dead?" she asked.

"Oh no. You have forgotten your elementary physics. A charge deposits only on the outside of a conductor. Electrons will not enter it."

"But why are they drifting then?"

"Any antenna will draw the charge in, if the line is active; that's its job. Like having your hand on the knob of a radio in a lightning storm, a chancy act."

"So they're inert?"

"A few may have been standing too close to the instruments."

"They would be...?"

He shrugged. "Fried. Luck of the game."

"The Admiral — "

"Let us hope he was unlucky. Even if not, I suspect the Speculists will not look kindly upon one who has raised such a roudy chase and then caught nothing."

She laughed. They coasted in the gorgeous splendor.

Then he yawned, stretched, and said, "Getting cramped in here. Shall we find that wormhole you mentioned?"

He really didn't like travel all that much, indeed.

THINK OF THE GALAXY AS A SWARM OF gaudy bees, bright colors hovering in a ball. Stomp them somehow in midair, so they bank and turn in a furious, compressed disk. Yet their courses and destinies are now guided by small entities of great pretension: humans, at times no better than bees. Across the span of a hundred billion worlds, rich and ancient blood sings in pounding vessels. Even on so great a scale, the hunt is always on. □

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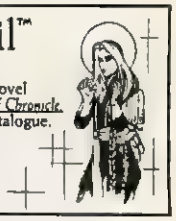

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PYRO

continued from page 67

"Tomas, I brought you Essa's gun. Here." Her voice is closer now, but I have to climb a few more steps. I feel for footholds. A soft click above me.

"You shouldn't have come here, Nadienne." This is getting complicated.

"Here, Tomas. A little higher."

Why isn't this right? That old Chan reflex starts to kick in, but not soon enough. I reach out, and pain stabs my arm. I can't move.

"Tomas, it's your turn," she says. Her voice lowers into a purr. It's not Nadienne. It's Rask.

She says, "This isn't stat, little cock, not yet. The eaters are quite slow, so we'll have lots of time." Her long powerful body oozes down past me like a huge snake, and she squats down and opens the door as my grip loosens on the rungs, and she lets me slide slowly past her, controlling my fall with the pressure of her torso and legs. She gives a soft grunt of pleasure as I finally drop free and crumple into a heap on the smooth metalled street. Landing beside me, she eases Jackie B's gun away and snaps it onto her low belt.

Big hands grab me and drag me through a door. My eyes stare off at a low table beside a heavy chair. On the table is Armana's crystal globe with the seedfish in it. What is that doing here?

"Do you like my little gift? Caladrina offered it to me for repairing the damage you did. You've cost me a lot of metal, Little Wire Man." Rask's voice is as smooth and heavy as honey. "You'll have a long time to think about that. You'll be in my art gallery. Help him see, Harrin."

The big hands grab me again, drag me through another door, and fling me on my face in the dark. My nose throbs and starts to bleed. The lights come up, the hands seize my head and lift it back until my neck nearly breaks, and I see a room full of sculptures.

They're men and women, locked golden in stat. Some are coupled together in sex, some are embracing like dancers, and all their faces wear the expressions of the most horrible agony, beyond despair and death.

"It's all in the timing," Rask's voice croons. "To get the right facial expression, I have to stat you just as the paralytic wears off. The little eaters go into stat too, but it only slows them down a lot. They'll be hard at work when you get your gold coating, but then they'll take their time."

The hands drop my head onto my burst nose. The pain makes my heart stop for several seconds.

She's right about the eaters. The biojector loaded them into my right arm, and that's where the itching starts to spread up toward my shoulder. It gets worse and worse, turns to flame, and I know this has no end.

Essa. At least she went quickly. I wonder about my ma — no, she'll be fine, with smooth Armana taking her metal and making her feel good about it. They're both survivors, they'll get along fine. But Nadienne, what about her? What if Rask decides to drag her back here too?

Nothing for me to do but hurt. Maybe if I'd had pyro this wouldn't have happened. I don't know. I try to beat back the flames in my arm and shoulder with my mind.

There's one chance. Just when the stat is about to hit, Rask will want my face looking like all these others. Maybe I can get just a few seconds.

The burning mounts higher and higher, spreads into my head and chest and down into my belly and spine. If I could move, I'd scream worse than when Ma pulled the stat off me. I lose track of time, making the seconds and hours look like all one thing.

"He's about ready. Bring him into the stat room." She's right, because my neck twitches. While she watches, hand on Jackie B's beamer butt, her cocks stand me under the hemisphere and run a suspension loop under my arms and across my chest, keeping me upright while I burn in hell.

My limbs start jerking uncontrollably. "That's good. Why don't you show us how you feel, Tomas?" My facial muscles writhe. I clamp the scream inside.

It's as if I'm a woman not wanting to give birth. No matter what I do, the scream will come out, and all the shit with it. Voluntary breath comes back, and I suck in more air, and then I hear my ma's voice inside my head. The jerking stops.

I'm a child again. "This is the moment for Chan thought." Ma's hand slaps my face. "Do not move." She slaps once more, burning the same cheek. "What do you do?" She stands with me in front of the whole Chan class. My little brother Simeon watches the tears run down my cheeks. I stay still.

I stay still. The pain from the eaters fries me in superheated oil, and I hang from the loop, wobbling, in the marked spot underneath the stat hemisphere, with a calm face and a broken nose. My mind slips free into the plan and the flow, and I sense Rask's pulse. I wait, feel the two cocks circling, count the timing of their steps, hear Rask's fingers brushing a datapad at my right.

"You're trying too hard," Rask says, her voice so gentle and smooth and urging. "Let it all go, and you'll feel better for just a moment. Don't you want just that one moment before you fall back into the fire? See, here it is, just let it go."

And oh, I want to. But my mind dances with the two cocks and the datapad and Rask's movements, and I hang among the flames and burn with a still face. Overhead, the hemisphere begins to descend. My limbs work again, but I stay still, my face a mask. I warm my tendons and muscles with brief tensions and relaxations, twitching toward the position the Kai Ren call Grass Coil.

"The moment is yours, Tomas. Scream, little cock. I will give you a moment's reprieve from the eaters if you do."

My inner dance winds to its expressive place. I hold still; Rask comes and strokes my hypersensitive skin, her fingertips razoring my chest. Her left hand holds the datapad. She smiles.

Jabbing out, my right hand and arm perform Spring Willow; the shattered front panel of the datapad rips through her carotid. The suspension loop is my fulcrum; I lever myself around her big body as she clutches her neck, and I fire Jackie B's beamer from behind her. One two, and the two cocks grabbing for their guns fry in the beam's blaze. They thrash, smoking, and don't get up again. My spine seems filled with molten glass.

I sever the suspension loop with another beamshot and land on both feet. Rask sinks to her knees, blood spurting across the stat room to paint the gray stone wall.

Her eyes open very wide, staring at an invisible someone. "Sor -" and she chokes red.

Limping, I circle her, pick up a shard of the datapad, and cut her throat. She falls on her face in the red pool she has made. "Essa," I say softly, like a Coll prayer, through my agony. I let go, scream and writhe on the slimed floor; no one comes. Staggering out, I open Rask's huge door to the street, half blinded and delirious, and I groan.

Hands gather me in, and a voice says, "Can you speak?"

"Yes," I croak, "Get me to the medman down in Sobi."

"Medman nothing. You're going to the H-ward." It's a man in blue.

"Eaters," I say, "They're in my — " and nothing happens for a long while.

"Tomas." My mader's voice.

"Ma?" My voice doesn't sound like much.

"Tomy! He's back!" Sounds of moving chairs and crying. I finally get an eye open, and a smooth cream-colored ceiling shows itself to me. The air is fresh. No more built-in pyro smell.

I reach up with a finger. My cheeks are healed.

The hospital aides won't let Ma hug me. I call out, "Ma?"

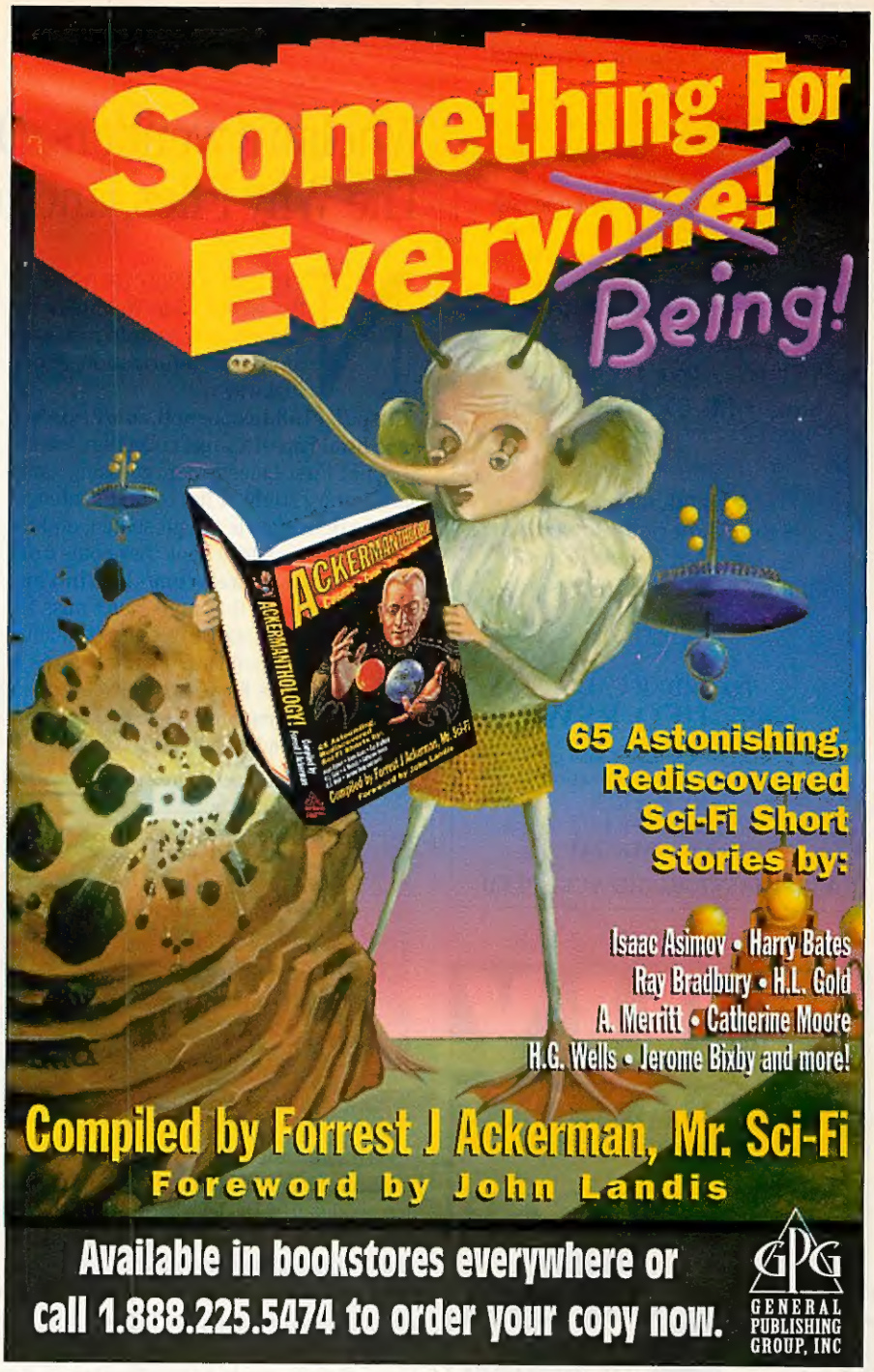
"Tomy! What do you want? Can I get you something?"

Armana, as usual, is standing behind her looking me over.

I ignore him. "Nothing, Ma. I just wanted to say thank you." I'm babbling, but I don't care. She found the stat reversal, she brought me out with Nadienne, she taught me to walk slow and calm through hell.

Later I'll say thank you again, and I'll try to explain. I fade into a dream.

I'm going to find Nadienne. When I do, we'll go over to the orchidist's for the darkblooms, and we'll take them up to Tyrae to the memwall, and torch them for Essa and Jackie B, and smear our lost friends' names in scented ashes on the wall. And then I'll hold Nadienne, and for all of what I've burned, I'll softly cry. □



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Whelan's wonders, Disney's latest, The Why Files, and more.

NEXT TIME YOU'RE CYBERSURFING the World Wide Web, here are some of our favorite rest stops along the Information Superhighway.

http://pc159.lns.cornell.edu/firsts/science.html Part of a larger collection, this site of Sci-Fi First Lines is part guessing-game, part literary study. A list of first sentences from various novels are presented, and the idea is to guess which book they come from.

http://www.calweb.com/~bertino/halloween.html On that note, don't miss the archives for the Hallowe'en fanatics' mailing list. Discussed herein are the prime spots to buy servo motors for your Hallowe'en dioramas, how to homebrew realistic skeletons, fog systems, tombstones, and so forth.

http://hercules.disney.com Disney's latest animated feature *Hercules* is, of course, accompanied by Disney's latest Web site. Visit here for production notes, mall-tour dates, and downloadable video-clips.

http://www.ryman-novel.com/ What a concept — a low-graphics, high-content site that's actually produced by a *content-creator*! Geoff Ryman, award-winning author of *Was* and *The Child Garden*, has built an engrossing hypertext novel that *works*. It's heavy stuff, reading a novel with no beginning and no end, but *so* worth it. There's even a sequel in the works — that you can contribute to.

http://whyfiles.news.wisc.edu/index.html The Why Files is the National Science Foundation's "Science Behind the News Site." Everything from tornadoes to forensics, covered in accessible layman's language.

http://www.landsoftheuniverse.com/ This was a lot funnier before the Heaven's Gate tragedy, but you gotta move on, right? Lands of the Universe is a — ahem — real estate brokerage that sells, uh, real estate on *other planets*. I mean, you can own a big hunk of Mars, and get a handsome burled walnut plaque testifying to the fact.

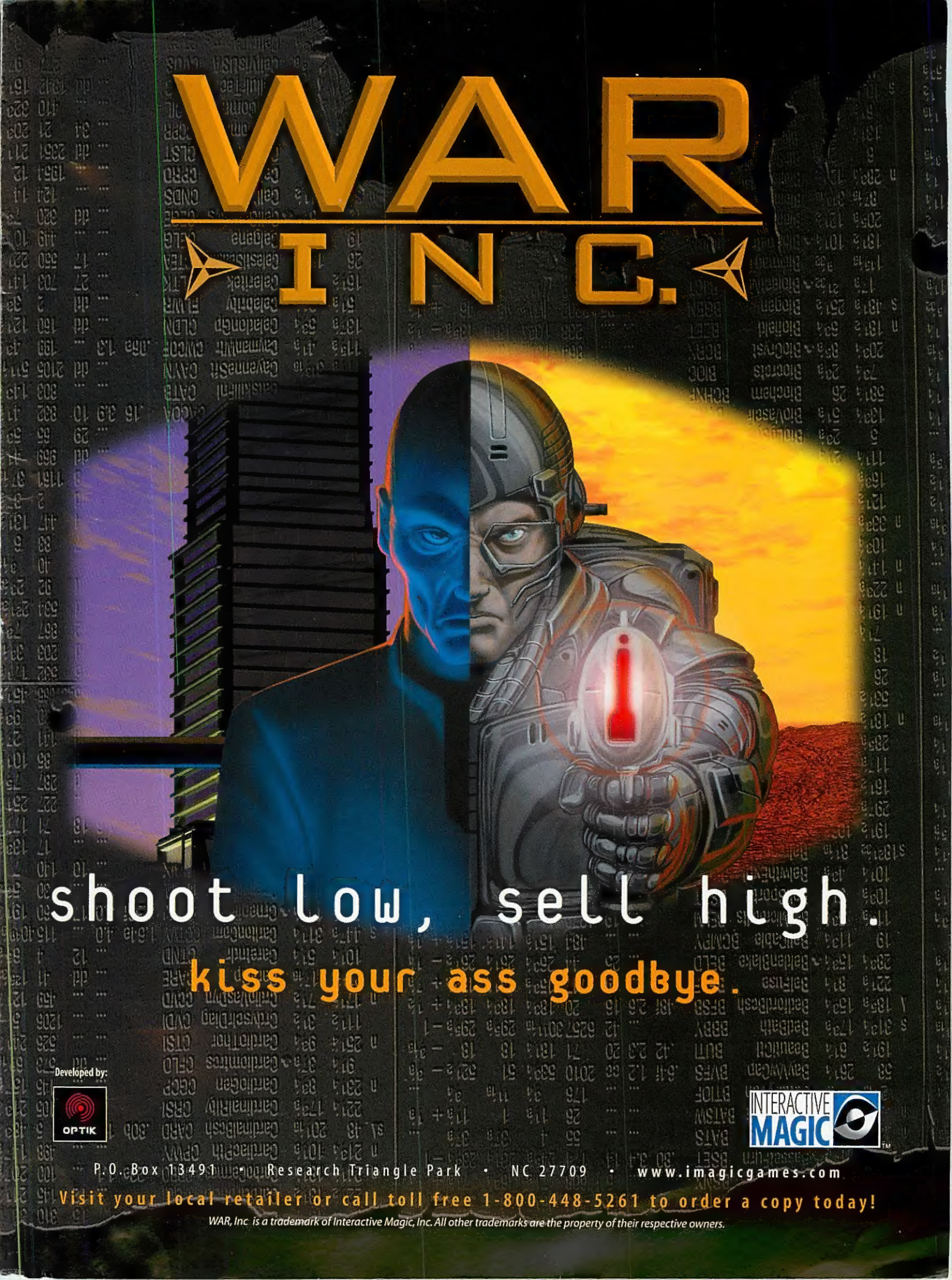
www.scifi.com/screengrab/caption.cgi From the Sci-Fi Channel comes this interactive delight for *Mystery Science Theater 3000* fans. Pit your rapier wit against the world of the Internet, by adding your own *MST3K*-style captions to random images that cycle every hour or so.

http://ns.net/~Reynaga/ The ultimate writer's resource — complete writer's guidelines for every genre magazine in the business.

http://www.glassonion.com This lush site showcases the art of Michael Whelan, and Glass Onion Graphics, his publisher. Included is an index of paintings, dozens of high-quality scans, a biography, information on upcoming exhibitions, and an area where you can e-mail the artist and get an answer.

http://www.nightmarefactory.com/shop.html Oh, *man*, I wish someone had opened a shop like this in my neighborhood when I was a kid. They sell corpses — *plastic* corpses! — and floating heads in bubbling jars, and Realistic Disembodied Arms, and all manner of wondrous stuff.

Cory Doctrow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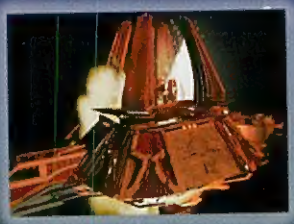
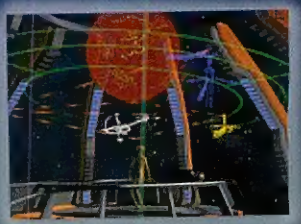

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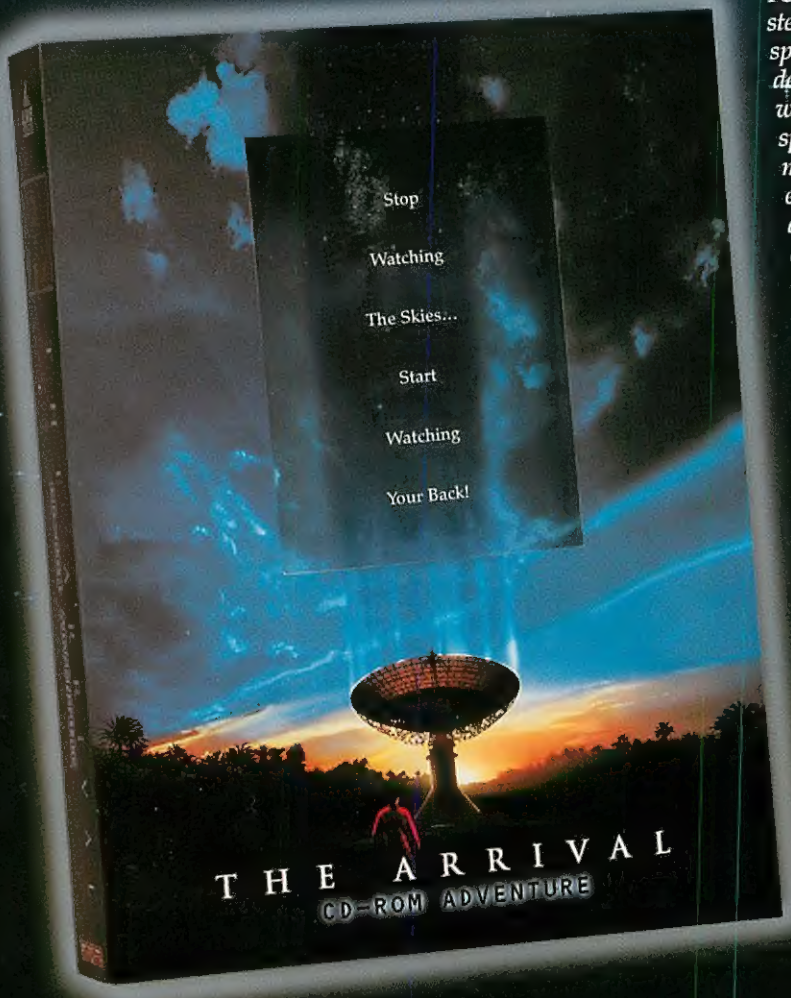

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